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Vol. XVIII. \$2.50
a Year.

Published Weekly by Beadle and Adams,
No. 98 WILLIAM ST., NEW YORK.

Price,
Five Cents. No. 223.



FORTUNATELY THE HANDWRITING WAS LARGE AND PLAIN, AND CONRAD MASTERED IT AS IT
SEEMED WITH A SINGLE GLANCE.

Gold Conrad's Watch-Dogs;

OR,

The Two Pard of Vulture Bar.

BY T. C. HARBAUGH,

AUTHOR OF "NICK-O'-THE-NIGHT," "DANDY JACK," "KIT HAREFOOT," "MIDNIGHT JACK," "OLD FROSTY," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A DELICATE ROSEBUD.

"WHICH horse shall I take?"

"The fastest, of course. You must start in five minutes. I'll have the message ready."

The young Indian boy to whom these orders were addressed sprung from the speaker's presence and ran toward the stables not far away.

"Horseflesh must warn the men at the Bar," said the man, nervously, as he watched the boy dispatched to the stables. "He didn't come to this country for any good. The eyes that blazed in his head I have seen before, but where? When he told me that he was on his way to La Tinaja, his own eyes called him a liar. The boys must watch him: they must kill him!" and the dark eyes of the handsome man flashed madly.

Conrad Gordon was this person's name. He was known as the richest man in the San Juan mining country, and was called "Gold Conrad" by many. His house was the finest in Lodeton.

He lived alone, wifeless and childless. Handsome, cold and determined, he moved through the silver world, speaking to few and keeping his own secrets. Five years' sojourn in the country where he had built his home had enriched him. His past life none knew; but a few words which he had dropped when well-wined caused a few to believe that his had been a wild career, checkered like a playing-board, if not tinged with crime.

It was pretty well known, however, that he could speak the Apache dialect, and then, his body-servant, hostler and secretary, was a youth of that nation.

When he had dispatched the boy to the stables, Gold Conrad did not turn his eyes from the structure until his Indian reappeared, leading a horse. Then Conrad entered the house and picked up a message which lay on a writing-table.

Carrying it out, he went to the edge of the porch and awaited the boy who was coming up, well-mounted.

"You made good time," Conrad said. "Are you ready to go?"

"I am ready."

"This message you will deliver to Colonel Thunder, and in private. He will know how to act. Should there be a seventh man at the Bar when you arrive (but that will not be, I think, unless people can fly) you will not show yourself to him—the seventh man, I mean. Did you see anybody here this morning?"

"I saw the man that called."

"Well, he is the man who must not see you at

Vulture Bar; above all things he must not know that you brought a message from me to Colonel Thunder."

The Indian youth had taken the paper and concealed it beneath his ornamented buckskin jacket.

"Now, remember—my future and your life depend on the delivery of that letter," Gordon went on. "That wild-looking man whose face was covered with the yellow dirt of the Armarilla country is more than he pretends to be. You saw him pin that woodpecker to the gatepost with his knife?"

"I did."

"That very act betrayed him, for there is but one man living who can do that at sixty feet. I cannot be mistaken; therefore, my message must reach Colonel Thunder. If that knife-thrower isn't stopped now, he'll be hunting for bigger game. And if he ever does that, you and I, Catana, must arm ourselves. Now go, and may success attend you! Take the Black Canyon road. It is the shortest and the best."

"To-morrow Colonel Thunder shall read your letter," said the Apache, as he leaped upon the horse.

"One moment. If you should, by any accident lose my letter—"

"Has Catana ever lost one?" interrupted the boy, a flash of insulted dignity in his eyes.

"No—"

"This one will not be lost!"

"Good! You're worth your weight in gold, Catana," and Gordon had time to pat the messenger's leg before he spoke to the horse which bounded away.

A warm day was drawing to a close while the conversation just recorded was taking place before Gold Conrad's house. The road that stretched from the porch seemed to lose itself among the mountains of the San Juan range that lifted their heads skyward not very far away.

It was narrow, like all mountain roads, and a cloud of yellowish dust soon enveloped the horse and his rider.

Conrad Gordon watched it until it disappeared and showed him the road again, but with no traveler thereon.

Catana had passed out of sight.

"I can trust Thunder. By George! I am afraid to trust any one else in these parts. I never thought that a woodpecker would make me so uneasy. If it wasn't so dark I'd go down and see where he pinned it to the post. I expect Catana opened his eyes at the feat; but if he is the man I think he is, then I've seen him transfix bigger game than woodpeckers."

Gold Conrad communed thus to himself in an audible tone before he retired to the house. The sun had sunk behind the sage bushes of Indian Knob, and the cool breeze, refreshing and pleasant, was stirring his locks, quite thickly sprinkled with gray.

He turned abruptly and passed into the room from which he had taken the message for Colonel Thunder. He not only closed the heavy door behind him, but locked it as it shut and lowered the window, which had been up at his writing-table.

The room looked like an arsenal. In each corner were several repeating-rifles and straight, heavy swords, to handle which a wrist of iron was needed. A low bed on one side of the apartment told that somebody slept in this well-protected room, and over the pillow hung a leather holster, from which the silver butt of a "Navy" protruded.

There was a restless, uneasy look in Gold Conrad's eyes as he threw himself into a chair that stood at the writing-table. Something perplexed him; he looked like a man, who in the midst of fancied security and prosperity sees the avenger of some crime appear before him.

"If Colonel Thunder should fail me—pshaw! I'm starting at impossibilities!" and Gordon laughed. "What! he fail me? When he does, Indian Knob will go to the coast."

The next moment a light tap on the window on the other side of the table made him start, and as he leaned forward he caught up and cocked one of the revolvers that lay on it.

"Who are you?" he demanded sternly. "I see you! Tell who you are, or I'll give you a pass to the limbo of fools!"

The light of the lamp threw a mellow glow on the ground, and objects a few feet from the outside sill, and Conrad Gordon uttered a truth when he declared that he saw the person who had tapped on the pane.

"Out with it! Ha! you see I have you now! Run if you dare! Draw and die!"

By a quick movement Gold Conrad had thrown up the lower sash and his revolver was covering the head of the man in the light.

"Of course you've got the Rosebud of the Pink Forks," came in a rough voice, which was followed by the fearless laugh of the genuine desperado. "Yer pistol hez a familiar look thet makes me glad thet I've come hyar. I say, cap'n, jes' hold it a leetle to the left so I kin inspect its caliber."

Gordon looked at the man amazed.

He was a perfect giant. Above the dark beard that covered two-thirds of his face, a pair of coal-black eyes glittered like carbuncles. He was clad in a dusty suit of mining clothes, and his pantaloons hid their ragged ends in a pair of dirty boots. Arms, he appeared to have none. Gordon could see the belt that went round his waist, but it seemed to carry no weapons.

The keen eyes of the mining king took in his visitor physically in a minute.

"I never saw him before," said Gold Conrad to himself. "I wonder what brought him here? Maybe I can use him."

Then he said to the man:

"The Rosebud of the Pink Forks, eh? Well my good fellow, won't you come in? You want to see me?"

"I would like to shed a little of my perfume in yer house, that's sartain," responded the giant, as Conrad lowered his weapon and straightened up. "Oh, don't open the door. I've been a winder flower afore," and the next moment the stranger had thrown himself into the room through the window, and towered before Gold Conrad bigger and more uncouth than ever.

"Now I'm at your service," Conrad said, re-

covering from his astonishment at the man's boldness.

"No, I'm at yours. You want jes' such a flower ez the Rosebud ov the Pink Forks, an' you want 'im bad, too!"

"I?"

"Yes, you, cap'n. Thar war a man hyar to-day—a mau what pinned a woodpecker to yer gate-post with his knife."

Gold Conrad started in spite of himself.

"I'm no fool," laughed the Rosebud. "I'm a flower thet blooms hyar to-day an' thar to-morrer. I'm at yer sarvice. Shell I go an' check thet man's baggage through? Say the word, cap'n."

Gordon looked astounded.

"I don't know you," he said. "To the best of my recollection we never met before. Who said that I want that man with the knife?"

"Yer eyes say so, cap'n. Mebbe I have never seen you afore to-night; but I'm yer man. Jes' send me arter him once: yes, jes' say 'Go!' to the Rosebud ov the Pink Forks."

"But what if I should refuse to send you?" ventured Gordon.

"You won't. You don't pick up such rare rosebuds in every garden. I'm a hotbed flower from Pink Forks, but I'm a reg'lar crusher. Which shell it be—you er the man what killed the woodpecker?"

From somewhere about his person, and in the twinkling of an eye, the Rosebud had produced a revolver, into whose barrel Gold Conrad could look without difficulty, for it was on a level with his eyes.

Gordon involuntarily shrunk from the weapon, but a moment later he had recovered his courage.

"The man with the knife, of course," he cried. "I would be a fool if I did not make this choice. Go on your errand, and then keep on to the coast."

"I didn't agree to do *that*, cap'n," returned the Rosebud, showing his discolored teeth by a grin. "I'll come back an' tell you."

The giant seemed to take great pleasure in speaking the last half of the sentence, and the rough sarcasm in which it was clothed still grated on Gordon's senses when the fellow leaped through the window and was gone.

For a moment Gold Conrad stood bewildered and mute in his strong room.

"No use to follow him," he suddenly cried. "The devil sent him here, for I will swear that I never saw him before, yet he knew why I sent Catana to Vulture Bar. By George! I'll start another message to Colonel Thunder yet this night," and hastily unlocking the door he was soon flying down the dark streets of the mining town.

At the end of the narrow street he rapped on the door of a cabin.

"Come in!" called out a rough voice.

Gordon pushed the door open.

A young man whose face wore an intelligent look rose from a stool before a brush fire and greeted him.

"Halleck," said Gordon, "I want you to start for Vulture Bar to-night."

"For *you*?" cried the young man. "You said yesterday that I was Catana's brother, and his

mother was a low Apache squaw! No! you insult me by coming here. Get out of my cabin, or by the gods! I'll choke you, if you are as rich as a diamond field."

The young man's eyes flashed madly as he sprung forward, but Gordon suddenly retreated, and saw the door of the cabin shut in his face.

CHAPTER II.

A NEW BOWIE AT VULTURE BAR.

VULTURE BAR was merely a small mining-town situated on the westernmost rim of the silver district, and not far from the banks of the Rio Dolores.

Not more than forty wooded houses, or shanties, composed the place, and these were inhabited by as rough-looking a lot of men as was ever seen beyond the Missouri.

The town was built on a stretch of elevated land which might have been thrown up by some caprice of nature old ages ago; but above it the lofty peaks of the San Juan range rose majestically, while on either side were dense woods of sage bushes, and wild canyons into whose depths the sun seldom peeped.

The mountains around it were full of silver deposits, and about one-half of Vulture Bar's population seemed to take an absorbing interest in such things. Mines were worked, and the dark bowels of the hills echoed to the ringing sound of the miner's pick.

But there were six men at the bar who seemed more like watch-dogs than anything else; they inhabited a large cabin at the western limits of the town, and their duty appeared to be to keep an eye on the miners. Whenever a rich vein was struck one of these watch-dogs immediately set out for Lodeton, and Gold Conrad soon knew its exact location. The six went everywhere; they penetrated the mountain mines, watched every ounce of silver from the time that it left the mines until it reached Gordon's clutches, and "ran the town."

In short, Gold Conrad had struck it rich at Vulture Bar; its tenants, desperate, dark-faced fellows though they were, were his slaves. He seemed to own the mountains; he paid the men for their labors; but the products of the secret mines were his. Secret mines, we say, for no one in Lodeton knew that on the borders of the Ute country this man was running one of the richest silver mills on the globe.

On the afternoon of the day after the sending of Catana from Lodeton to the Bar with a message for Colonel Thunder, six men might have been seen seated on three-legged stools in front of one of the cabins in the latter place.

They were the watch-dogs.

In the entire lot there was not one prepossessing face; all were dark, bearded and repulsive, wolfish in countenance, and bearish in strength. They were dressed alike, in dark shirts and coarse pantaloons, the ends of which were hidden in their boots.

On the afternoon referred to four out of the six were whiling time away with a game of whisky poker, and the greasy cards were continually falling on the large flat stone which served for a gambling table. The other two were looking quietly on.

It was a scene not uncommon during the

warm days, for the gambling spot was well shaded, and the watch-dogs were not needed in the mines.

Presently the door of the cabin which was partly closed was opened by a person on the inside, and the game for a few moments had another spectator. Several of the gamblers looked up at the new witness, but soon returned to the dirty cards which fell faster and faster on the "fortune stone," as they had termed their table.

The person in the doorway had a girlish contour, although clad in male garments. The eyes were a soft, beautiful blue, the cheeks ruddy as the color of a mountain rose, and the hair was a rich auburn, full of natural waves, and lovely. The hands and feet were *petite* and girlish in every particular, and even a casual spectator would at once declare that the person belonged to the softer sex, despite the garb.

"Esmer didn't sleep long," exclaimed one of the two men, who had been watching the game. "We've been swearin' too much fur 'im. Don't you see, boys, how his eyes rebuke us?"

"Rebuke, fiddlesticks!" was a rough response. "Ef you don't want the lamb to hear us, colonel, why do you keep 'im byar?"

The man addressed as colonel darted a frowning look at the speaker, and then stepped toward the person in the door.

"You didn't sleep like a log, eh?" he said, interposing his body between the blue eyes and the gamblers. "Well, go inside. I want to talk to you, anyhow."

The young person did not reply, but obeyed, and the two entered the cabin together. Under a window was a cot which the new character had lately left, and the watch-dog pointed to it as he closed the door.

"Let's sit down," he said.

"No; I've been lying enough to-day," was the answer in a soft voice. "You will not care if I stand?"

"Well, suit yerself, Esmer. You don't like this life; you would rather live apart from Vulture Bar? Now, honest Injun, wouldn't you?"

"Where would I go if I had to leave this place? You know where I belong; but you have always refused to tell me."

Colonel Thunder smiled.

"Of course I hev," he answered. "I hev adopted you, an' you ar' Colonel Thunder's child."

"Not in reality?"

"You ar' ef I want it to be so. Jes' stick to me, and I'll pull you through. Don't ax me to give you woman's clothes. I dasn't do it, Esmer; fur yer own good I dasn't. Ef I did, somebody would hear afore to-morrer night, thet thar war a gal at the Bar, an' then all my hopes would be ruined. You make a stavin'-lookin' boy, an' ef some fellers on the Bar suspicion anything, they dasn't come right out an' say thet you ar' a gal; nor they dasn't go an' tell *him* either!"

"Who do you mean by him?" asked Esmer.

"Why, the man what owns us, body an' soul."

"Gold Conrad?"

"Yes. You're nothin' to him, mebbe; but he mustn't know that a gal claims a moment ov

his slaves' time; he wants every second ov it, the silver-eater! Now, you understand. Will you stay where I am, er shall Colonel Thunder turn you off?"

"I will stay!" cried the girl. "I would not know where to go if you should desert me. One of these days I shall wear the garments that belong to my sex; shall I not?"

"Ov course! you're not to remain a boy forever. Some day you'll pick up a rich husband, an' the cherub ov Vulture Bar will be the queen ov some city."

The girl blushed, but her eyes sparkled.

"Yes, obey me an' all will go well. Cross me an' you may be buried in the clothes you wear. Thar! they're callin' me outside. Stay hyar."

The face of the girl had grown pale at certain words that Colonel Thunder had uttered, and she hardly knew that he had taken his departure.

When the acknowledged leader of Gold Conrad's watch-dogs reached the outside of the cabin he found the game broken up, and the players were standing around an Indianified looking boy who sat on a horse which had evidently carried him a long distance.

"Catana!" murmured Colonel Thunder, recognizing the boy at a glance.

"Something important's in the wind, er the cap'n wouldn't send the dog that sleeps at his bedroom door.

Then a hasty stride took him to Catana's side, and the eyes of the pair met. Thunder's had an eager and anxious glitter, while the Indian boy's wore a look of disappointment.

"Go back to the game, boys," commanded the watch-dog captain to his men, as he laid his hand on Catana's bridle.

"The cap'n wants to draw on the bank, that's all, and the next moment he was leading the horse toward the mountain.

He did not stop until he had put a bill between him and the shanties of Vulture Bar.

"Now, what is it, boy?" he asked, fixing his eyes on Catana's face.

"I don't know, exactly, sir, but here is what my master says," was the answer, and the young Apache drew forth the message which Conrad had the day before given him for the man who now stood by him.

Colonel Thunder unfolded the paper as if such messages were an every-day occurrence, and Catana watched him.

For a moment his eyes betrayed no unusual excitement; but all at once they flashed and grew fiercer while he read on. Catana might have scanned the message a thousand times during the journey he had just made; but his look told that the contents of the paper were entirely unknown to him.

If he had looked over Colonel Thunder's bronzed hands he would have read the following:

"TO COLONEL THUNDER:—

"This is to warn you that a certain man left my house this morning, bound, according to his own statement, for La Tinaja. Before he left the premises he pinned a mountain woodpecker to a gate-post with his knife from a distance of sixty feet! La Tinaja is not his destination. It is Vulture Bar! I

am sure of it, and if he is not stopped *at once*, his knife will find bigger game. Ten years ago there was but one living man who could handle a knife that way. I say that *he* has come to life, and that he is now on his way to Vulture Bar Camp. He is armed only with a knife, but in his hands it is worth ten revolvers. Meet him on his arrival, and for Heaven's sake *get the best of him!* He has the same eyes and the very same voice that the other knife wizard had. This devil calls himself Arkansaw. He is your enemy, as he is mine. Spot him before he fairly gets his bearings. Fail not, colonel! "GORDON."

When Thunder had read through he looked up.

"Did you pass the man mentioned in this letter?"

"No," replied Catana.

"Good! he is to come, then," and as Colonel Thunder thrust the letter beneath his jacket he turned and walked rapidly toward the town.

The Indian boy wheeled his horse and followed him.

"Hello! what's up?" suddenly exclaimed Thunder. "The boys hev some attraction in front ov the shanty."

"Caramba! he has come!" ejaculated Catana. "I feared that the fresh hoof-prints in the Black Canyon were his."

"Then he was mounted?"

"Not when he left Gold Conrad's; but I found a dead Ute on my way; he had a knife wound in the back of his neck."

"A knife wound, eh?" and he showed his teeth as he glanced at the young Apache.

The Indian suddenly drew rein.

"He must not see me here. The master said so," he said, looking at Thunder who was wondering at the halt.

"Then go back below the hill and wait for me. When war you to return?"

"He did not say."

"I'll hev a message fer you afore mornin'—one that'll make Gold Conrad sleep peacefully fur a hull week."

Catana turned and withdrew below the hill, whose brow they had gained while Colonel Thunder proceeded on.

As he neared the group of men before the watch-dogs' hut, his gait became a leisure walk, and, apparently calm, he approached the crowd.

"Ninety mile to La Tinaja, eh?" said a voice in the center of the crowd. "Wal, I guess I'll browse around the Bar till mornin'. Come up to the big hotel to-night an' see me play with this toothpick," and he displayed to the eyes of Gold Conrad's minions a knife whose blade was at least fourteen inches in length.

He balanced it on one of his bronzed fingers for a moment, and then whirling it suddenly into the air he threw his body back and watched it.

The bowie whirled over and over as it ascended, and came down in a like manner. For a moment it seemed that the point of the blade would penetrate the juggler's face, but all at once his mouth opened and he caught the hilt of the knife between his teeth and held it firmly!

A murmur of applause broke from the breathless spectators; but Colonel Thunder muttered a curse that sounded like a growl of rage.

"Come down to the Howlin' Wilderness to-night an' see Arkansaw," the new-comer went on, as he sheathed the formidable blade. "I'm stoppin' at thet earthly paradise fur the present. I kin throw this toothpick through an Injun at sixty feet. Hunt one up an' hev 'im on deck to-night. Now, don't shake the show, boys. It sha'n't cost you a cent; an' ef the performance don't suit you, I'll give ye yer money back an' set 'em up besides. Thet's fair, ain't it?" and the knife-thrower laughed coarsely as he moved away.

During this scene Colonel Thunder had looked on from the outside of the crowd with amazement in his eyes. Something—the stranger's effrontery, perhaps—astonished him, and his eye followed him with a deadly challenge as he moved on.

But as soon as he could the colonel separated his five companions from the rest of the crowd and addressed them in a whisper, while his eyes of evil still blazed.

"That man is more than he says he is. He is the cap'n's deadly enemy. We'll go down to the Howlin' Wilderness together. An' don't furgit thet he must give his last exhibition to-night. His last, the cap'n says. I say so, too. Now, what say you?"

The answer came immediately from five tongues:

"We will make it his last show!"

Colonel Thunder smiled and sent a glance of triumph toward the hill behind whose brow Gold Conrad's red messenger rested from his ride.

CHAPTER III.

THE BOOTLESS ROBBERY.

"By Jove! his quick retreat kept my hands from his throat. After insulting the memory of my mother, he has the audacity to come to my cabin and ask me to risk my life in order that he may rake in or save a few threatened thousands. Gold Conrad, I'd see you die first! My face is darker than a girl's, that I know; but I am not a squaw's offspring. Your thousands shall not permit you to talk thus. I am your equal in every way, save wealth. I have been your slave with hundreds of others ever since I allowed your gold to hire me, but from this moment I am free! I cut loose from you, Conrad Gordon; you have not gold enough to hire me a moment longer. Keep what you owe me. Some of these days you shall acknowledge that my mother was your superior."

The speaker was the young man called Halleck, whose cabin we saw Gold Conrad seek after the departure of the Rosebud from his house.

We have heard the burning words in which Halleck refused to carry the second message to Vulture Bar for the silver magnate, and it is to that same cabin that we have returned.

Gordon had not ventured to try the young man again. He knew that words would only serve to augment his passion, and a personal encounter, when he was looking for another messenger, was one of the last things desired.

Halleck apparently waited for him to enter the cabin again, for he stood in the firelight, ready to throw himself like an enraged tiger

upon the man who had called him Catana's brother.

But he waited in vain.

"He sent one messenger to the Bar, I know, to-day," the young man continued, when his ire had been somewhat calmed by thought. "I saw Catana riding away on Gold-dust, and I would swear that that was his destination. Now, what has happened that he must start another, and at night, too? Something's gone wrong there. The man of money is in a fix—the hound that called me an Indian!"

A minute later the cabin was without a tenant, although the brush-fire still illumined the apartment.

Where was Halleck?

About two hundred yards from the cabin stood a house almost as pretentious as the one that Gold Conrad inhabited. Halleck was rapping at the front door.

"Who's there?" asked a voice on the inside.

"Me—Halleck."

"What do you want?"

"A horse."

"Go to Gold Conrad; he's your master."

Halleck bit his lip.

"We have dissolved friendship," he said, to the invisible speaker. "I hate, despise, curse him! I want a horse for the purpose of getting even with him. I thought you hated him, too. I—"

Halleck paused and started back, for the door was open and the most beautiful woman in Lodeton stood before him, her face and figure revealed by the lamp she carried in her hand. Clad in a dark wrapper confined at the waist by a silver belt, and with a mass of black hair covering her shoulders, "The Queen of Fate," as the woman was called, looked superbly fascinating.

The flashing of her eyes was intense as Halleck gazed, and he found them studying him as if their bewitching owner would read the very secrets of his soul.

"So you hate him?" the Queen of Fate said slowly. "How much?"

"Enough to baffle him if I get a swift horse."

"Whither would you ride?"

"To Vulture Bar."

"Then you know—"

"That he is growing immensely rich by the mines he is working there. Yes, I know that."

"His six devils are there to do his bidding. Colonel Thunder will slay on sight."

"Of course," Halleck was growing impatient; the minutes were slipping away. "Shall I have the horse, madam?"

"Yes; I'll call Pinos."

"No. I beg of you to let my expedition be a secret," interrupted the young man.

The Queen of Fate smiled.

"You'll do," she said. "I want an ally one of these days."

"To fight him?"

"Yes."

"Then call on me."

Her answer was a look of satisfaction, and as she shut the door Halleck bounded down the hall.

Assisted by the hands of the woman, he saddled a fiery young racer that appeared as fleet

as the mountain wind and vaulted into the saddle while she, strong for a woman, held the bridle.

"Ours is a common cause," she said, as he adjusted his feet in the stirrups, and made a motion for her to remove her hand.

"I shall not forget that, but I shall avenge myself first," he answered, and then, before she could reply, he touched the animal lightly with the spurs, and was soon beyond ear-shot.

Halleck's passion cooled when he found himself beyond the limits of the mining-town. Although it was summer time, the sultriness of the day just passed had been succeeded by the cool night winds of the mountains, which might almost be called chilling.

The young man had not quitted his cabin without arming himself. He knew that a wild waste lay between him and his destination, that he would have to ride over ground frequented by the plundering Utes, and a band of desperate road-agents whose crimes could not be counted by the dead they left unburied. It was a new road to him: but he knew it almost as well as if he had been a frequent traveler, for his own hands had drawn for Gold Conrad a map of it after the magnate's own survey.

"What am I going to Vulture Bar for, anyhow?" Halleck asked himself. "To die? I hope not. No! I am going there to act as circumstances may require, always keeping before me the unending hatred that I have for him."

The horse loaned for the nocturnal expedition by the Queen of Fate was a racer of good blood and splendid bottom. Surefooted like the ibex, he bore young Halleck on, and the setting stars saw him straining every nerve to reach the goal.

All at once crack! went the girth, and the rider uttered an exclamation of rage as he was almost unhorsed.

"Something had to happen!" he said, dismounting. "Fate never grants a fellow a journey free from accidents, and I am getting my share."

He was riding through a wide canyon, well lit up by the stars, when the accident occurred. It was near morning, and he was already beyond the worst half of the road.

Drawing his knife, he was about to cut a strip from the broken girth, in order to unite the two parts, when the sound of hoofs struck his ears.

"Gordon's messenger!" flashed through his mind. "My repulse did not deter him. I wonder who he got to carry his message?"

A horse was certainly entering the canyon, the bed of which was as hard as flint. That he had a rider Halleck well knew.

"I might have had the message before this if I had taken a second thought, but that would have made me a traitor. I could play road-agent and get it now. By George! I will!"

At that moment the injury to the girth was repaired, and Halleck prepared to act on the resolve he had taken. He drew a handkerchief from his pocket and transformed it into a mask in a moment. Then he led his horse into the shadows, and throwing the bridle over a bush turned to the road.

He was not a moment too soon, for the second messenger to Vulture Bar was upon him.

Halleck's revolver went up, and its barrel gleamed in the starlight.

"Halt!"

The man drew rein with a cry of astonishment, and his steed was brought to a full stop so suddenly that only an expert rider could have kept the saddle.

"Give me the message you carry to Colonel Thunder! Quick!" said Halleck. "If you do not surrender it, I will take it from you."

The voice of the young man was stern and threatening. The messenger could not mistake its intonation.

"The writing, or death! Take your choice!"

An oath, the movement of an arm in the starlight, and a paper, fluttering through the air, fell at Halleck's feet.

"Now I can go on?"

"No, sir! Wheel and ride for your life. A verbal message would answer the purpose of a written one. You can't go on to the Bar."

Another curse, but this time less bitter than its predecessor.

A moment later the new messenger was galloping back toward Lodeton, and Halleck with his prize in his hand, was again pursuing his journey.

He could hardly keep back the fierce chuckle of delight that tried to reach his lips spite of his efforts, and when he debouched from the canyon upon a high plain, he stopped his horse and drew a bunch of lucifers from his pocket.

"Now, my amiable insulter, I'll know why you send two messengers to Vulture Bar several hours apart," he murmured, striking the matches.

He waited impatiently for the light to get large enough to enable him to decipher the writing on the paper he had already unfolded, and when the little torch blazed up sufficiently he strained his eyes to read.

But the next instant he uttered a loud cry of mingled rage and chagrin, and with an oath flung the paper away.

This was what had rewarded his pains:

"ROSEBUD OF THE PINE FORKS,	Dr.
To 1 bowie	\$3 00
"1 gallon "Old Snips"	2 00
"1 pair Santa Fe boots	9 00

\$14 00

"Settled in full this day.

FINNSICKLE."

"I stopped the wrong man!" muttered Halleck, as he drove the spurs into his steed's rowels and cursed his first attempt to play the road-agent. "The fellow wasn't Gold Conrad's messenger, but the owner of that worthless account which he carried until it saved his life. I wonder who the Rosebud of the Forks Pines is, and why he is behind me to-night?"

Halleck now increased his animal's speed, and more than once, before the shanties of Vulture Bar greeted his eyes, a quiet smile played about the corners of his mouth as he recalled the Rosebud and his motley purchases.

"I'd like to meet the Rosebud of the Pink Forks. I owe him an apology," said Halleck, dismissing the subject.

He was destined to meet him soon enough.

CHAPTER IV.

A KNIFE IN THE SHOULDER.

GOLD CONRAD'S watch-dogs were more than twenty hours' hard riding from their master, and another day was waning when Halleck came in sight of the shanties of Vulture Bar.

The sight did not surprise him; indeed, the place had a familiar look, for he had more than once studied the location of the cabins on Gordon's map.

He knew that the first cabin he would reach on entering the cluster was Colonel Thunder's, and as he had often heard of, but never seen that redoubtable man, Halleck felt himself becoming curious as he neared the building.

If he had been listening attentively he might have heard a slight ejaculation of surprise on his right as he rode up the hill over which Thunder had conducted Catana to read Gordon's message, and if he had used his eyes better than he did, he would have caught a glimpse of a familiar figure among the sage bushes.

The croucher was the Apache boy, and with the pupils of his fiery Indian eyes distended, he gazed at the young man whom he had left the day before in the mines at Lodeton.

"*Caramba!* who sends him here—the master?" hissed Catana. "Must he send one message by Catana and another by the young Americano whom Catana hates?"

Halleck rode leisurely on, and when he had passed the brow of the hill, the figure of the Apache had left the bushes and was gliding panther-like over the path after him.

Catana was devoted to the man he served, and the thought that Gold Conrad had intrusted a message to the young American was fiery food for his jealous nature.

That portion of Vulture Bar which the youthful horseman was about to enter seemed deserted. He did not know that the man with the knife was soon to exhibit his skill with the bowie at the Howling Wilderness Hotel.

"Colonel Thunder's house, eh? Well, it isn't a palace, if it's tenant does reign supreme here," said Halleck to himself when he reached the cabin. "Everything is so quiet; surely the colonel is not at home."

He had given utterance to his thoughts in an unguarded tone as he soon discovered, for the door of the cabin suddenly opened and a voice said:

"No, sir, the colonel is not exactly at home; but he isn't far away, if you wish to see him."

The tone and the speaker startled Halleck. He took in the sylph-like figure of the colonel's *protegee* at a glance, and found himself staring in a ludicrous manner into the face before him.

A nameless thrill ran through his frame; but he partly recovered his composure by a great effort.

"I beg your pardon," he said. "Did I ask for Colonel Thunder?"

"I thought I heard you," was the answer; "but one is liable to be mistaken. You do not wish to see him, then?"

"Not just now. Are you his—"

Halleck paused and blushed to his ears, for while he had no doubts concerning the sex of the young creature before him, he felt that he was on delicate ground.

"I stay here," Esmer said, coming to his relief. "You do not want to see Colonel Thunder just now, you say. Will you not dismount and come in? He will come back before long."

Almost mechanically Halleck dismounted, but held his horse by the bridle-rein.

"Let me have your horse," said Esmer, stepping forward and taking the bridle from his hand.

The young man watched her as she led the animal around one corner of the cabin and tossed the leathern reins over an iron pin driven into a tree. Then she returned and led the way into the cabin.

"This isn't baffling Gold Conrad," thought Halleck. "I mustn't allow this siren to keep me long, for the second messenger might slip in, and then, I don't know why the first, Catana, was sent. I shall make my stay short here."

Thus determined, Halleck gently refused the stool which Esmer offered, but leaned against the oaken table near the door.

The interior of the cabin was quite gloomy, but a candle soon sent forth its feeble light, and Halleck had another opportunity to study his new acquaintance.

If he had looked over his shoulder, he might have seen the face of a spy at the window.

Catana was there.

"You have never been to the Bar before?" Esmer asked, breaking the silence.

"This is my first visit; but I should have known the place, for Gold Conrad's maps which I drew from his surveys have made us acquainted."

"Gold Conrad!" exclaimed Esmer, probably recurring to her late conversation with Colonel Thunder. "Does he know me?"

"I hope not."

"But when you go back—"

"I need not go back," was the interruption.

"You will tell him that I am here. His commands have been broken; but Colonel Thunder will defy him if it comes to the worst."

"His commands? Oh, yes, I understand. Then it is true—"

"That I am not what my garments would have you believe? Yes," and the young girl's fingers touched Halleck's arm, and her eyes had a soft, pleading look, hard to resist. "I am the only woman at Vulture Bar. His commands forbid the presence of one here; his slaves must think of nothing but toil, toil. A woman's love even must not lighten their lives. Think of it! isn't that cruel; isn't it devilish?" and the dark eyes of Thunder's *protegee* flashed indignantly.

"It is just like him," he said. "He calls me an Indian—the son of an Apache squaw."

A cry of astonishment broke from Esmer's lips.

"You an Indian?" she cried. "You are not dark enough, and yet—"

"And yet my skin is darker than yours—a good deal darker, I fancy," said Halleck, smiling.

The girl did not reply immediately, but picked up the candle and held it close to his face while her eyes seemed to devour him.

"Well, what do you think?" asked the young

man, when the candle had been returned to the table.

"Gold Conrad insulted you," was the quick answer, spoken in a tone of resentment. "But isn't there Spanish blood in your veins?"

"I don't know," admitted Halleck.

"Where are you from?"

"I came to Lodeton five years ago, at Conrad Gordon's suggestion. His message found me at Ojo de Leon, New Mexico. I remembered to have met him, or a man who resembled him before; but I was a boy then. When I got to his mines he made me his private secretary, but an Indian boy name Catana soon supplanted me. I continued in his service, but had a cabin of my own until he circulated the lie of which I have spoken: that I am not only an Indian, but that in addition to that, I am this Catana's brother. That is an infamous lie, I know. We don't look alike."

Halleck's passions rose as he proceeded, and Esmer drew back and folding her arms like a man watched him with glowing eyes.

"You hate him and you will not betray me?" she said. "You are out of his service now. If you want new labor, Colonel Thunder may employ you. I have been keeping his books, but the task is irksome, and a hundred times he has promised to find a new hand. Let us go and find him. Some strange link unites him and Gold Conrad. I can tell you this much without violating any confidence, for I discovered this myself. Come, we will go."

"Where is the colonel?"

"At the show."

A show at Vulture Bar?"

Esmer saw the youth's questioning look.

"A wild-looking fellow and his bowie-knife will be on exhibition at the Howling Wilderness. He came to the Bar this afternoon, and since Colonel Thunder has acted like a madman. He got a message—"

"Only one?"

"I know of but one."

"It was from Gold Conrad. What did he say?"

"If I knew I might not tell," was the answer.

"I might betray Gold Conrad, but I cannot go back on Colonel Thunder. Will you go with me?"

"Yes."

The next moment Esmer put out the candle and stepped toward the door; at the same time a pair of fiery eyes left the window.

Halleck was the first of the twain to step outside, and as he did so a figure crouched at the foot of the cabin leaped at him with a short cry, more beast-like than human.

The young man threw out his arms to grapple with his antagonist; but they sunk down when the blow dealt by the assaulter was fiercely struck, and Halleck staggered against the logs with a groan.

Colonel Thunder's *protegee* was soon on the spot, but the assassin gave her but the sound of his footsteps. If he had lingered he might have fallen before the revolver gripped in the girl's right hand.

When she wheeled on the white face against the cabin, it was to cry out against the mean blow.

"Who did this? Who is your foe?—tell me!"

"No! I reserve for my own vengeance the name of the devil that struck me," was Halleck's reply, and he smiled a forced smile as he stepped from the cabin. "See! I am not dead!" he continued. "I am ready to go and see The Man with the Knife."

Esmer gave him a look of admiration, and they moved away.

CHAPTER V.

THE FOURTEEN-INCH BOWIE.

THE wildest, and we might say, the largest crowd ever seen in the uncouth reception-room and saloon of the Howling Wilderness Hotel stood in the sawdust that formed its carpet, while Halleck and his new acquaintance were hastening to the scene.

This room was thirty feet long by twenty-five wide, so that it was almost square. At one end was a rough bar, presided over by a savage-looking fellow, who dispensed the vile drinks to thirsty crowds.

"Whisky Joe" had made preparation for the unusual entertainment which he knew was sure to bring the entire population of the Bar to the Howling Wilderness. He had made a platform out of half a dozen rough planks, which extended from the top of the counter to the weather-boards behind it. This stage he had tested with his own weight, which was somewhat remarkable, and smiled with satisfaction when he saw Arkansaw spring upon it and nod his approval.

The Man with the Knife looked down upon a sea of faces that almost filled the room to overflowing. They were not all the property of white men. Here and there were the bronzed features of an Indian, Utes whose broad shoulders rose five feet and ten inches above their elk-skin moccasins. A kind of secret treaty appeared to exist between these red-men and Gold Conrad's silver-hunters, for every night their presence lent variety to Whisky Jose's crowd.

Arkansaw's costume had undergone but little change; he had merely discarded his dusty jacket, and faced his audience in dark-brown shirt and pantaloons. Tall and muscular, his physique appeared to advantage in his simple clothing. His mass of dark hair which had probably never known the invasion of a comb, covered his head like the matted mane of a lion; and his piratical beard, aided by a pair of eagle eyes, that seemed able to pierce a block of marble, proclaimed him more than a simple tramp-juggler, if not a man with a mission.

Those eyes took in his audience at a glance.

He was standing above the crowd, so that all could see; and at the moment when he carelessly drew the lengthy bowie not an eye in the house was fixed elsewhere than on him.

"Remember," whispered Colonel Thunder over his shoulder to one of his five. "This must be that man's last show. Pass the word to the boys; they may forget it."

He never took his eyes from the man with the knife as he issued these commands, and the watch-dog who heard them turned and whispered them into the ear of a neighbor who gave a significant nod.

"The signal?" asked this man,

"The colonel will give it. But we're to see all his tricks first."

Arkansaw had made his bow to the house—a bow whose very awkwardness was assumed, and the next moment the bowie was whirling through the air to be caught by the hilt between his teeth on its descent, a trick which he had already performed to the knowledge of at least a few in the house.

Then he went through a number of strange performances, such as throwing the knife aloft and catching it between his shirt and flesh on the back of his neck, hurling it with unerring accuracy through a bullet fastened to the boards at one end of the stage; and transfixing little cards in like manner by throwing the knife over his shoulder. Arkansaw was *en rapport* with his crowd, for the applause was frequent; but there were at least six men who did not join in.

"He's a tearer, colonel," one of the fellows ventured to say to Gold Conrad's manager.

"No; he's a devil! This entertainment is only a side show to the one he came hyar to give," was the answer. "I know it."

"Then you've heard ov 'im?"

"I've seen 'im before to-day."

"I thought so."

Thunder gave the man a mad look.

"You thought so! What do you know?"

"I thought you two war old acquaintances, by the way he looked to-day when one ov the boys told 'im that we war yer men. His eyes didn't exactly flash, colonel, but they said: 'Oh, yes, Colonel Thunder; know 'im well!' Thar! thet's his last trick."

"Get ready. Tell the boys."

The man stepped back and said a few words to four rough-looking fellows who stood in a group.

"Now, gentlemen, the performance ov the evening will conclude by my best trick, ef the audience will furnish the material. I require a live Injun, an' I promise to hand 'im back in five minutes, in good condition."

The whole house laughed at this, and here and there several Indians were pushed toward the platform.

"Never hed any trouble in gettin' an Injun on the San Juan," continued Arkansaw. "Used to git one every night, an' sometimes two. Hurry up yer red-skins."

"Come, let us go. There are men here who will egg on the sacrifice that madman demands," said one youth to another on the edge of the crowd, only a few steps from Colonel Thunder.

"I will stay. I will see it out," was the reply.

"So will I."

Halleck and Esmer, the girl, had witnessed the greater part of the performance given by the man with the knife; but at times the young man missed some of the tricks for gazing at Colonel Thunder, who had been pointed out by his companion.

"Waal, when my audience refuses to furnish me material, I ginerally select it myself," suddenly exclaimed the man on the platform, whirling upon the crowd. "Sometimes I take an Injun and sometimes a white man. This

time I prefer the latter. Look out! hyar comes a knife."

At that moment Colonel Thunder's eyes met those of the man with the knife, and with a wild oath he threw up his pistol-arm.

The words "hyar comes a knife," seemed terribly earnest ones, and as Arkansaw uttered them, he suddenly caught his bowie at the point and started forward. At the same time he carried his knife-arm threateningly back.

The Indians dodged amid the hooting laughter of their white brethren; but a loud cry rose from the throats of all as the bowie actually left its owner's hand.

It whirled but once, and then shot downward into the dense, awe-stricken crowd.

Those who turned their heads to watch its flight were not quick enough, for with a roar of pain strangely mixed with a volley of oaths, Colonel Thunder staggered back with six inches of the deadly blade sticking out behind his left shoulder!

The work of the knife was received with a cry of rage that shook the roof of the bar-room. Colonel Thunder had fallen to the ground, killed as every one believed, and the crowd, knife and pistol armed, made a dash at the stage.

For one moment The Man with the Knife surveyed the scene beneath him with an eye that blazed like an eagle's in a tempest.

He showed his teeth in a wolfish grin. He looked like a man who knows that in his strength always lies his safety, and as if to prove this, he turned suddenly and threw himself against the broad boards that formed the northern end of the saloon.

The next instant crash! went the planks, and as the figure of the man with the knife shot through the opening a dozen revolvers cracked; but their bullets did nothing more than bury themselves above Whisky Jose's head.

The smoke had not cleared away before men, Indians as well as whites, were clambering over the stage to the opening, while many were rushing toward the main entrance. But one thought filled the minds of all—to catch Arkansaw.

A few, among these Halleck and Esmer, had remained at Colonel Thunder's side, and when the crowd had almost entirely left the room Jose shut the door.

Colonel Thunder gritted his teeth as the knife was withdrawn, and then fastened his eyes on it.

"It looks like the same he used, ten years ago," he said, unconsciously speaking aloud; "only the one he had then had a red hilt. Jose, have they caught 'im? No? go out an' call 'em off; call my family off, anyhow. He came hyar to give me his knife. I hope he didn't see the boy."

"Yer boy—the young 'un kernal? He war hyar just now," said the barkeeper.

"Hyar? Esmer?"

"I am here."

Colonel Thunder turned toward the sound, and fastened his eyes with a look full of rebuke upon his *protegee*.

"What brought you hyar?" he demanded, fiercely.

"It was my fault. Blame me, sir," said Halleck, advancing.

"You?" and Thunder looked fixedly at Gold Conrad's young enemy, measuring him with his flashing eyes from head to foot. "So it war your fault that Esmer came hyar, eh? Come hyar. I want to say a word in private."

Halleck stepped forward, and as Colonel Thunder's right hand fell on his shoulder his heavy mustache touched his ear.

"Leave Vulture Bar without my authority, and the buzzards will pick your bones among the sage-bushes!" he hissed. "I've seen you afore. I knew you when you war the idol of the Apache camp."

A flash of fire lit up Halleck's eyes, and his face kindled with insult.

"Colonel Thunder, you lie!" he exclaimed. "I have been insulted before in the same manner. Take back your infamous words, or I'll finish Arkansaw's work—finish it right here, too!"

Halleck stepped forward as he finished, and his left hand shot at his insulter's throat.

Colonel Thunder laughed the laugh of the fearless desperado.

"Don't be a fool," he said, calmly. "Kill me and never know who yer mother war."

The hand dropped at Halleck's side.

CHAPTER VI.

THE ROSEBUD AND HIS PARDS.

COLONEL THUNDER'S word was law at the Bar, and Whisky Jose hastened to obey the command addressed to him. He went outside and proclaimed in a voice that might have been heard a mile away that Arkansaw should not be pursued.

It had the desired effect, for the hunters came back one by one, and the saloon began to fill.

In the mean time, by the help of five stalwart men, his pards, the master of Vulture Bar had been helped to his cabin. The loss of blood had weakened him, and given his face a pallor which made him look like another person.

Halleck did not follow the little company to the cabin, beneath whose roof he had already stood. He had pressed Esmer's hand before she left the Howling Wilderness, and caught, with a satisfied smile, the friendly promises that beamed in her eyes.

Henceforth, the young man believed, his fate was to be strangely linked with that girl's.

He did not venture back into the saloon, where a hundred excited men were discussing the startling events of the night. He was a stranger at the Bar, and as such would not only attract attention, but rouse suspicion. He had reached it simultaneously with The Man with the Knife, and there were not a few desperate fellows who would naturally regard such an event suspicious.

Therefore Halleck left the structure and sought the open air. His wound did not pain him now; but his mind soon went back to the short struggle before Colonel Thunder's cabin, and to his antagonist.

"My assailant must be at the Bar," he muttered. "I wish I could find him and return the compliments which he lately gave me on the point of his bowie. He never liked me—the

jealous red-skin, and I am sure that I have lost no time loving him. He must be here somewhere. As I am forbidden to leave the Bar I might as well spend a little time in looking him up."

Halleck moved away, but his attention was soon called to the statue of a man that was visible by a bit of light that streamed through the opening which Arkansaw had made in the weather-boarding of the saloon. The statue of a man, we say, for the figure seemed planted in the ground, and did not move a limb.

"One of my watchers," thought the young man. "Colonel Thunder is going to carry out his threat if I attempt to leave the Bar without his permission. He is king here. I must not forget that. By Jove! why couldn't I try this fellow?"

The thought was no sooner matured than Halleck moved off in full view of the statue.

"Pshaw! my scheme doesn't affect him," he said, as he suddenly halted and glanced over his shoulder. "He doesn't seem to care a nickel whether I go or stay. He hasn't moved for ten minutes; he— There! he's going to exercise his limbs."

The object of Halleck's attention had suddenly left his post.

"By my life! it is Arkansaw!" exclaimed the young man. "He's a fool to walk back into the jaws of death. Maybe he has discovered that he missed the heart he threw at and has returned for the purpose of finishing a bungled job. Well, my bowie-knife, sail in and give the colonel his quietus. Halleck will not interfere."

The man so closely watched by Gold Conrad's enemy, walked toward the rear walls of the Howling Wilderness and stopped as if to listen to the liquor-loosened tongues inside. Halleck mechanically crept forward and kept his eye on him. If the man was Arkansaw, he had returned to the Bar for a purpose, and that purpose the young man desired to know.

All at once Halleck was forced to crouch to the ground, for the figure of the listener had wheeled toward him and was coming forward.

"He got in a part ov his work," Halleck heard a voice say, that startled him. "They didn't foller him fur, it seems; the very man he cut called 'em off—all but the Injuns. I wish I hed got hyar sooner. I would ef that roady hadn't stopped me in the canyon."

Halleck thought that a strange laugh followed the last word; but he was not certain.

The man had revealed himself; he was not Arkansaw, but the man whom he had stopped with the belief that he was Gold Conrad's second messenger to the Bar. It was the Rosebud of the Pink Forks.

He passed within a few feet of Halleck and went toward the mines. Over the same ground, as the young man had lately learned, The Man with the Knife had fled a few minutes before.

"Me a messenger from Gold Conrad?" still giving vent to his thoughts. What did the roady take me fur, anyhow?

"Gordon told me to come to the Bar on a mission. I made the gold king take his choice between two hearts an', like a sensible man, he chose to keep his own in a healthy condition. Oh, you thievin' tiger! the Rosebud will go back

afore long an' settle a long-standin' account with you."

Halleck's heart gave a great leap into his throat.

He was not alone in his hatred of the magnate of Lodeton. The man before him was an enemy; he was going back some day and pay off the debt of vengeance he owed.

A strange idea flashed through the youth's mind. If this man hated Gold Conrad, he could not love Colonel Thunder, his tool; therefore, why could not he (Halleck) form an alliance which would insure him a friend, an ally in a land where he had but one friend, and that a young girl?

The thought fascinated our hero, and a moment later he had touched the Rosebud's arm.

The man turned with a light cry, and Halleck heard the click of a revolver's lock as a human arm shot up until it was on a level with his face.

But undaunted he looked over the barrel into the bearded face of the Rosebud.

"I have just heard you say that you hate Gold Conrad," Halleck said. "So do I; therefore let us be friends."

The representative of the Pink forks, wherever they were, did not seem to hear the words. His eyes, keen as an eagle's, were measuring the figure before him from head to foot. Halleck had a good figure; if his face was extremely youthful, it was strong, well-knit, and full of suppleness.

"I say that I hate the same man you do," continued Halleck, determined to make the Rosebud hear him. "But, if you prefer it, I will get my work in first and leave you nothing to do when you go back to Lodeton to cancel the debt you have just been talking about."

This time the words roused the Rosebud, and his burning eyes met Halleck's gaze.

"Oh, you want to become my pard, eh?" he said. "Did I say that I hate Gold Conrad?"

"I understood you so," said Halleck.

"Wal, mebber I did. In the first place, who ar' you?"

"My name is Halleck. It is all the name I ever had."

"Yer handle ain't as musical as mine, the Rosebud ov the Pink Forks," and the worthy laughed. "When did you come hyar?"

"Oh, I've been hyar some time," Halleck answered, using some of the enunciation peculiar to the rough class to show the Rosebud that he had been associated with the desperate men of the mines.

"About two hours I should judge," said the Rosebud. "What did you do with my reseat? It doesn't amount to much, but I hed carried it so long that I hated to part with it. I settled it. Hyar, give it up, young 'un."

One of Rosebud's hands had fallen upon Halleck's shoulder.

"The reseat first, the pard bizness after'ards," came over the glittering barrel.

"I haven't got it. It was of no value to me, and you would have treated it just as I did if, instead of an important message, you had captured such a paper as it was. I owe you an apology; but the receipt I threw away."

The Rosebud's lower jaw dropped.

"Honest Injun?"

"What would I want to lie about such a thing for?" flashed Halleck. "I've never seen you before to-night—"

"But I've seen you often, now that I've been lookin' at you fer five minutes," replied the Rosebud. "Wal, let the blamed old reseat go. Ef you still want to press the pard bizness, we'll go on a little further."

"Then we'll go on."

The two men thus strangely met started away together, and soon found themselves among the mines nearest the Bar.

When the Rosebud stopped, it was in a gulch whose bed was full of giant bowlders. It was a wild place for a conference, and Halleck's ear was quick to catch a sound that startled him.

The next moment he caught sight of a head surmounted by a tuft of feathers, and his hand instantly drew his revolver.

"What's up?"

"Indians!"

"Ar' that all?"

Halleck didn't know how to reply. While he knew that the men of Vulture Bar were on half-friendly terms with the Utes, he was also aware of this fact; the mines were dangerous ground after night—a real district of death, made so by these very Indians.

Therefore, he felt himself justified in drawing his weapon; but the Rosebud's nonchalance had disconcerted him.

"Well," said Halleck, biting his lip, "if you can stand it, I can. But there are Indians about, I see them."

"I want you to see 'em," was the answer, and a familiar bird-call rose from the man's lips.

The next instant six stalwart savages left the shadows of the rocks and came forward.

"These pards ov mine ought to have a say when it comes to takin' new members into the firm ov Rosebud and company," continued the man, waving his hand at the new-comers. "Seen 'em afore to-night? Waal I should smile," and the Rosebud displayed his yellow teeth in a grin. "My pards ar' reg'lar tigers; they're the red hollyhocks ov the Ute nation—none ov the thievin' Apaches what used to hold you on their ponies when you war a baby."

"That cowardly insult again!" flashed Halleck, instinctively laying his hand on his revolver. "It has been flung in my teeth three times within the last twenty-four hours."

"I see it kinder r'iles you," was the reply. "But you're not goin' to say that I never see'd the Apaches do thet, ar' you? Why, yer mother war the purtiest—"

"There!" cried Halleck springing forward, and seizing the Rosebud's arm. "That will do! I know what you are going to say; but it is a lie!—an infamous lie!"

"Yer a reg'lar mountain lion. I like yer stile. By hokev! you'd be an ornament at the Pink Forks. We'll take you in ez a full pard."

"Never!" cried Halleck. "A moment ago I wanted your friendship—your aid; but now I wouldn't accept it for the world. I will go to my vengeance alone. I will work my own way, in spite of Colonel Thunder and his pards, and you and yours!"

With the last word, which was accompanied by a look of lofty disdain, Halleck stepped back.

"Hold on, my cooler! Jes' one minute—"

"Not one second! Attempt to detain me here, and I'll deprive the Pink Forks of their ornament."

"Hothead must stop!" said a new voice. "Him must listen to Rosebud!" and one of the Indians sprung between Halleck and the man from the Pink Forks.

"Back! You are near enough now!" threatened the youth, retreating. "I don't want to kill, so don't step on my toes."

The Indian's eyes seemed to blaze as they glanced quickly at his companions.

"When the Black Coyote speaks, young fools must hear!"

Halleck raised his weapon, but at the same moment something whistled through the air, and the Indian staggered back with a cry that made the gulch ring.

Gold Conrad's young enemy could not repress an exclamation of horror, for a large bowie-knife was quivering in the breast of the stalwart Ute!

He turned and looked in the direction from which the strange and killing missile had come; but though he saw nothing, he knew that The Man with the Knife was not far away.

The next minute Halleck was flying toward Vulture Bar.

CHAPTER VII.

COLONEL THUNDER GETS MORE ORDERS.

"WHO is there?"

The girl, Esmer, asked this question, with her hand on the latch of the cabin-door and her ear at the crevice.

A rough mountain rap had startled her, and she had cleared the space between Colonel Thunder's couch and the door with a single bound.

The summons had awakened him. The colonel's eyes had a mad, maniacal glare; he seemed to think that The Man with the Knife had come back.

There was no reply to Esmer's question; the person outside seemed confounded by the musical voice.

"Who's thar?" suddenly cried the voice of Gold Conrad's man. "Answer, or git a bullet!"

"I've jes' arrived from the cap'n. I've got a message for ye," was the reply.

"Another?" murmured Thunder. "Hand it in as Esmer opens the door."

"All right."

"An' wait whar you ar' till I know what it says."

Esmer opened the door several inches, and a great, bronzed hand that clutched a bit of paper was thrust inside. As the girl relieved it of the message, it was withdrawn and the door was shut again.

Colonel Thunder awaited the delivery of the message with anxious eyes, although in calm tones he told Esmer to bar the door first of all things.

Esmer held the candle while her guardian leaned over the couch and unfolded the paper.

For a moment he glanced at its contents, and then crushed it quickly in his hand.

"They are all gettin' hyar about the same time," Esmer heard him say, half-aloud, while his eyes flashed with the old tiger light. "So the last one seems to be huntin' the first, eh? Well, I'll do my duty, cap'n. I'll go an' put my pards at work right off."

He sprung from the couch and looked at Esmer.

"I'm going out!" he said. "Don't stir till I come back," and as he finished, a twinge of pain in his shoulder made him grate his teeth.

Esmer did not attempt to interfere; she knew the nature of the mountain lion too well for that.

He seized his hat which lay on the floor of the couch and strode toward the door; the next minute he was gone.

Just beyond the threshold of the cabin the messenger confronted him, a man whose garments were muddy and wet.

"You are tired?" said Thunder, addressing him.

"Kinder," admitted the man.

"Do you know where Silent Sam's is?"

"No; but I must see Sam."

"Then come along."

The two men went off together.

This was all that Esmer saw and heard.

As she turned something white caught her eye; it was a piece of crumpled paper, and it lay midway between the door and the couch.

Recognizing it with a singular cry, the girl sprung forward and picked it up. A second later, with bated breath, and a wildly-beating heart, she was trying to decipher it in the weird candle-light.

Her face, flushed with expectation when she began, was as white as ashes when she finished, for she had read as follows:

"COLONEL THUNDER:—

"Another devil has just started for Vulture Bar. He calls himself the Rosebud of the Pink Forks and wants to kill, first, The Man with the Knife, and then me. Now you have two to interest you. Also—I have just learned it—Halleck (you know him!) has taken one of the Queen's horses and left Lode-ton. We have quarreled. If he gets to the Bar, treat him as you would my worst enemy—but do it quietly! Let nothing balk you; forget who his mother was. I have forgotten. GORDON."

Esmer read the foregoing with feelings which no pen can describe.

She cared nothing for the individual mentioned in the first part of the message; his name told that he was but another desperado.

But Halleck was the youth who had lately bade her adieu on the scene of Arkansaw's fatal exhibition. He hated Gold Gordon, he had told her himself that they had quarreled, and that he had come to the Bar for the express purpose of having revenge in some manner.

Now his life was in danger—he had been handed over to the tender mercies of the six men who were known far and wide as the Six Revolvers of Vulture Bar.

Esmer's eyes suddenly flashed indignantly while she thought. Halleck had fallen among wolves; he was helpless in the toils which yet that night would be thrown finally around him. And he knew it not.

All at once the girl sprung to the door and threw it open. Since the thrilling events at the Howling Wilderness, a full round moon had planted her shield of silver in the heavens, and the girl flitted away with a revolver within easy reach of her hand.

She went up to the "hotel" and peeped in. Whisky Jose was closing for the night, and the flickering light of his lamps fell only on his burly figure.

A few rods away Esmer paused before Silent Sam's cabin, and looked in at the window. The man who seldom spoke was looking at his new guest, a person whose nether garments were muddy. It was Gold Conrad's second messenger.

"Not there!" muttered Esmer, in tones full of anxiety. "Merciful heavens! I wonder if they have run him down already?"

She went back again, but all at once when half-way between Silent Sam's and her own home, a wind from the mountain mines brought a coarse laugh to her ears. Esmer stopped; so did her heart.

"I'll find them now," she cried, and turning to the left she darted away.

She seemed from the first to know the exact location of the man who had laughed, for without turning either to the right or to the left she pressed on until she reached a dark opening in the side of a hill.

"They're doing their infamous work under ground!" she said, as she went in.

Her manner of procedure told that her entire life had not been passed in Colonel Thunder's cabin, for she hurried on, avoiding the rough howlers in the walls of the dark corridor, as well as if it had been daylight.

Far ahead several lights, like distant stars, greeted her eyes, but she knew that they were torches held aloft by the man-tigers among whom fate had made her spend her life.

Esmer halted at last; but it was to hug a gloomy wall for a moment and gaze on the scene before her.

The Watch-Dogs of the Bar had found one of the new arrivals. If he was not stalwart and desperate-looking like Arkansaw and the Rosebud, he had at least a dangerous eye in his head, and carried a steady hand.

Esmer counted five men in the large cave-like room before her—five demons. They stood before Halleck.

The fortitude of the young man gained a look of admiration from Esmer. He was looking into the faces of the Revolvers with a calmness that should have subdued the light that flashed in their eyes.

Esmer looked everywhere for the colonel; she penetrated the shadows of the cavern in vain.

"He sent his minions! he dared not come himself," said the girl. "Well, I am glad he is not here."

The thought had hardly been expressed when a voice so near Esmer that she wheeled suddenly broke the silence:

"What brought you to the Bar, Halleck?"

"Need I tell you twice? Vengeance! I wanted to strike him where his greatest interest lies."

"How would you have done it?"

"I do not know. I had not completed my plans."

"Who came with you?"

"I came alone."

"Beware! don't pass in yer checks a-lyin'. You hed company to the Bar."

"I had not; the Rosebud was behind me."

Esmer heard Halleck's questioner utter an oath which did not reach his ears.

How did the youth know that the "company" referred to was the representative of the Pink Forks?

"You were not to leave the Bar without Colonel Thunder's authority. He's goin' to give it now, an' you're goin' away."

Halleck's reply was a contemptuous sneer for the coarse wit intended by the last sentence.

"I know you, Colonel Thunder," he said.

"By killing me you help your master, Conrad Gordon. You dare not let me live."

"We will not!" and a brutal laugh followed.

"It is a pity that Arkansaw's bowie missed its mark to-night. It will not miss the next time."

"Ha!"

"I know it. He told me so."

"Since the throw?"

Halleck smiled and shut his lips defiantly.

The interrogator stepped from the shadows into the light of the torches.

It was really Colonel Thunder, tall, stalwart and angry!

"You have seen him since the throw? Good! Where is he?"

Halleck's eyes said: "Find out if you can!"

"Oh, silence is your game," grated Thunder.

"Well, as you like it, I will make you keep it forever. Ready!"

Five bronzed fingers glided to the five revolvers in the Watch-Dogs' hands.

Esmer had not watched the imperiled young man for several moments; she had seen no one but her guardian, and with almost devouring impatience she waited for the command that would kill.

All at once his hand was uplifted, his lips parted and the signal was about to fall from them, when our heroine sprung over the intervening space and threw herself before Gold Conrad's foe.

"Drop your weapons!" she cried, as she faced the swarthy five. "Down with them, or die!"

Her revolver moved restlessly right and left before her pale face; her eyes emitted flashes of flame.

The Watch-Dogs involuntarily started back and glanced at their leader.

Colonel Thunder started forward and stretched forth his arm.

"Nothing must stan' between us an' duty!" he thundered. "Shoot yer way to Halleck through the body that covers him. Fire!"

CHAPTER VIII.

"FOR THE QUEEN!"

WHILE these thrilling events were transpiring underground, others almost as exciting were taking place in the starlight and the lamplight not far away.

We have mentioned that Esmer, while hunting Colonel Thunder and his pards, saw the

second messenger sitting in the light that revealed the interior of Silent Sam's cabin.

Establishing his identity by a glance, she moved away, and her place at the window was almost immediately filled by a wild face covered with dark hair. The pair of eyes that looked into the cabin now saw the same scene that the girl had just left.

Silent Sam was one of the characters of Vulture Bar; he seldom spoke, and when he did his words were monosyllables, but spoken to the point. His cabin consisted of two apartments, the larger one of which, at the time of which we write, was occupied by Gold Conrad's messenger and himself; a strong door, secured by several strong iron bars, led to the other room, which did not have a single window.

This dumb man held a responsible position at the Bar.

Let us see what it was.

The man at the window kept an immovable position for many minutes.

After awhile the messenger from Lodeton looked up and encountering Sam's expressionless gaze, drew a fuse from his pocket.

At the same time he made a sign that caused Sam's eyes to twinkle.

"The cap'n sent this," he said, extending the fuse, which Sam eagerly took. "He said that you hed better fit this one on right away. Suth-in' might require its use afore long."

Silent Sam nodded and moved toward the barred door. Without a word he removed two of the bars, and opening the door, disclosed a dark room, into which he motioned the messenger to follow him.

Just inside the room hung a lantern, which Sam lighted. The messenger looked disappointed, for the little room was comparatively empty.

"I don't see whar you're goin' to fix yer fuse," he remarked.

"I'll show you."

Sam stooped and lifted a trap-door in the floor; this action showed the messenger an apparently solid iron rod driven into the ground, but Sam unscrewed a brass top, and proved it to be hollow. Then he drew forth a fuse which felt quite damp; the messenger shook his head when he had examined it.

"How long has this fuse been there?" he asked, glancing at the rod.

"Three months."

"That's too long for one fuse. You had no other?"

Sam shook his head.

"This one would have failed. Put the new one in; right away, the cap'n said."

The guardian of the mine stooped, and in a minute had fixed the fuse to the top of the hollow rod. Then adjusting the brass cap, he was about to return the trap to its place when the messenger touched his shoulder. Sam looked up inquiringly.

"How does the blamed thing work? What all goes up when you fire it?"

"Everything!" said Sam, showing his teeth in a grin.

"Thet's a good deal," was the reply. "It doesn't hurt the Bar, does it?"

"No; but the mines. Now I will tell you,"

Sam continued, growing talkative. "What if we should have trouble? What if the Indians or some white men should try to take the mines from the cap'n? I would fire the fuse when, whiz! crash! the old mountains would fly apart, and the mines would be useless."

"Not with powder?"

"No."

"Dynamite?"

Sam's eyes sparkled as he nodded.

At the same time he shut the trap.

"I would be safe hyar," he said; "the Bar would shake, that's all; but the mines! ah! they could never be worked ag'in."

"It would ruin the cap'n."

"Yes; but his foes would die poor."

"By George! that's a complete thing!" suddenly exclaimed a voice at the door which Sam had left open. "I'm anxious to see how the fuse works. I'll jest tap the cap with the hilt of my bowie."

Silent Sam and the messenger stood before the speaker like persons suddenly struck dumb. Their eyes seemed ready to fly from their heads, and all volition appeared to have left them as they stared at the burly man who was stepping toward the trap-door with a bowie-knife clutched at the point.

"I'll jest giv it one tap," he continued. "I don't believe you kin blow up the mines with sich a thing as you've rigged up hyar. You've been givin' this fellar a game ov wind—Sam, you've been lyin'!"

The man who was none other than Arkansaw was at the trap-door before Silent Sam recovered. As for the messenger, he had retreated to the door with a face as white as ashes.

"Stop!" commanded Sam, laying his hand on the intruder's shoulder. "Stop!"

There was a threat in his eyes.

"Stop? I will when I've tapped the cap!" said The Man with the Knife, turning away.

Silent Sam said no more, but hastily collecting his strength, he threw himself upon Arkansaw.

The two men went to the floor together, and for a moment, having been taken at a disadvantage, the bowie-king seemed in a perilous situation. For the guardian of the mine of destruction had produced a revolver, with which he was hunting in the dim light for his antagonist.

But all at once Arkansaw whirled and knocked the weapon up, just as Sam's finger was about to press the trigger, and the next moment the body of the guardian fell in a heap in the darkest corner of the room.

"I've got the same kind ov a dose fur you ef you want it!" cried Arkansaw, turning to the door; but the sentence concluded abruptly, for the messenger from Gold Conrad was gone.

For a moment a contemptuous look beamed in Arkansaw's eyes; but without expressing his thoughts, he bent over the trap-door and examined the fuse. Below the cap, which he removed, he discovered a little wire, which he drew out and cut off with his bowie three inches below the top, thus destroying the connecting current of electricity which the explosion, or firing of the fuse would send to the mines. Then he replaced the cap, shut the trap-door, and

glanced at Silent Sam. That worthy was lying on his face, and consequently had not witnessed the tampering with the train.

"I've got things pretty much in my own hands," The Man with the Knife said, with a malicious grin, as he left the room, the door of which he left open. "I'll go an' see how Colonel Thunder ar' gettin' along. I'm kinder glad I missed him since I diskivered the mine. By the widowed Jingo! I never thought he hed rigged up such a thing ez thet to keep sech fellers ez Arkansaw from gittin' the best ov 'im!"

There was a broad smile of triumph beneath the profuse beard and mustache that the bowie-king sported, and the next minute the cabin was left to its unconscious tenant.

Out in the starlight a figure standing at the window dropped suddenly to the ground and followed the knife-thrower. Presently another and another appeared, until six were on his trail.

Arkansaw, apparently unaware of this espionage glided along the cabins until he reached the one occupied by Colonel Thunder, and his protegee. For a moment he applied his ear to the crack between jamb and door and listened.

"Not at home—not even the gal thet he calls a boy," muttered Arkansaw. "Suthin's up. I see'd 'em all at my show. Ef I thought the kernul'd come home alone I'd go in an' wait. I'll go in anyhow, an' take a squint at the interior of the nest."

He lifted the latch and stalked in. At the same time the six figures sprung to the door.

Five of them were Indians, the sixth was a white man; but one who might have been a king among desperadoes. He laid his left hand on the latch, and listened while he looked over his shoulder at his followers.

He was waiting for Arkansaw to strike a light as certain words told him that the bowie-king was hunting for a candle. All at once an exclamation told him that the object had been found, and then came the cap-like report of a pair of lucifers.

"Ho! ho! blood on his head!" exclaimed the man in the hut. "I winged the Vulture. Confound it! when I go back to Arkansaw I'll never say a word about the man I missed at twenty feet. Never!"

The next second crash! went the door, and Arkansaw saw the six human tigers that leaped at him.

The candle fell from his hands, but alighted right side up on the table, and continued to burn, but a second later the naked arm of one of the Indians swept it off and put it out.

But not before Arkansaw had recognized the bronzed leader of the scarlet wolves.

"Waal, Rosebud, you've gone cl'ar back on the Queen!" he cried.

These words had a magic effect.

The Rosebud of the Pink Forks whirled upon his own followers and with one sweep of his pistol-arm dashed aside the arms that were trying to get at Arkansaw.

"Back! back!" he hoarsely shouted. "The person ov Arkansas is sacred! He is still in the sarvice ov the Queen. Thet makes us brothers!"

The Utes stared into the face of the speaker,

and shrunk back, but not without many a menace.

What had come over their leader?

They saw him turn to Arkansaw and put forward his right hand.

"Fur the Queen?" he asked, hesitating just the least.

"Yes."

"Put 'er thar!" and the hands of the two men met.

"I came hyar to wipe you out," the Rosebud went on. "I thought you had gone back on her."

"If you think, I hev give me the hull length ov yer toothpick, Rosebud," was the answer, and Arkansaw tore his shirt open with one mad wrench of his right hand, and bared his breast.

But the man from the Pine Forks shook his head and sheathed his knife.

CHAPTER IX.

PARDS ONCE MORE.

"Go down thar an' wait fur me," said the Rosebud, turning to his red comrades, while he still grasped Arkansaw's hand; "down whar I found you."

The Indian departed and the two men were alone in the cabin.

"The Queen sent me down hyar," he continued, lifting his eyes to Arkansaw's face, now visible in the mellow light that the moon was throwing into the room. "I'll tell you why I war huntin' you, pard. She said jes' afore I left: 'Ef you finds any traitors at the Bar giv' 'em no quarters. An' I know thet she thinks you thet kind ov a chick.'"

"Me? Stan' by me until I prove thet a lie, Rosebud."

"I will do thet—so will my red boys."

"They ar' yours, then? I killed one an hour ago."

"The knife went clear through him. You've kept in practice, I see."

"Ef you hed seen my throw at the Howlin' Wilderness you'd hev thought thet I hed lost my grip."

"I came too late; but I heard ov thet throw. The kurnel doesn't object to it bein' his shoulder thet took the bowie, I reckon?"

"Ov course, not," and Arkansaw smiled. "You saw the Queen—"

"Yesterday at sundown."

"I war at Lodeton yesterday; but I didn't call. Why? Wal, Rosebud, I thought I would wait until I could go back an' throw at the last man I want to hit."

There was a fiendish gleam in the eyes of the bowie-king as he uttered the last words. "But how does our Queen look?"

"Purtier than ever, ef I'm a jedge ov woman."

"I hev'n't sot eyes on 'er since I put her on the mustang on the Rio Pecos, an' told her to hunt until she hed enough of vengeance."

"Thet war ten year ago."

"Nearly so. She's found him? What a trailer she hez been!"

"An' he, the 'tarnal fool, sleeps within a hundred yards ov thet mine ov dynamite. I've been helpin' 'er all this time."

"You, Rosebud?"

The eyes of the man from the Pink Forks flashed with pride.

"What hev you been doin?" Arkansaw went on before he could speak.

"The water flooded his mines last year; the dams broke, *I war thar!* His big boss, Strong Dick war found dead in the mine, *I war thar!* One night the secret diary which he hed kept for twenty-five years turned up missin'. Rosebud war thar, Arkansaw. Jehu! pard, you oughter hev see'd the Queen's eyes flash when them books fell inter her lap. Thet war the hardest ov all blows."

"Wait till the Queen turns an' says: 'Finish the play, Arkansaw.' But her child—the little one what we used to nuss turn-about?"

"Still missin'! Didn't he play his cards well thar?"

Arkansaw said nothing, but while his eyes shone strangely, he led the Rosebud to a door that led into the other compartment of the cabin. The candle, overturned by one of the Indians, had been relighted, and was in his hand.

On the threshold of the second room the burly figure of The Man with the Knife came to a halt, and his long arm pointed to a narrow cot that touched the rough logs that formed the well.

His lips said nothing, his look and gesture were enough, and the Rosebud gave a gasp for joy as he glanced into his pard's face.

"The gal? Jehosaphat! I hev hunted fer nuthin' fer ten year, but you hev not hunted, yet found!"

"I am not sartain. Colonel Thunder calls it a boy, but I'm too old fer thet, Rosebud. You'll see somebody's eyes an' hear the voice we used to foller away down South when you see the person what sleeps on thet bed."

"Whar is she?"

"Not hyar; thet's sartain," and Arkansaw shut the door.

The two men left the cabin, but did not see the figure squatted in one corner of the main room.

The light fell but partially on the spy, whose face was dark, like an Indian's, and whose eyes glared at them like a hyena's."

Beyond the door of Colonel Thunder's cabin all was still. Although the night was lovely, and the hour not far from dawn, nobody seemed abroad but the twain so strangely met.

"The boy I saved from yer Injun?" suddenly asked Arkansaw. "Did you know him?"

"Ov course."

"Does the Queen?"

"I think so. He came hyar on her horse."

Arkansaw drew his bowie and balanced it on his finger in an abstracted mauner. The Rosebud watched him out of the corners of his eyes.

All at once the bowie-king started off.

"I'm gettin' the fever again," the Rosebud heard him mutter. "I want to break suthin'—to smash things!"

The Rosebud sprung after him, and tried to stop him, but in vain; Arkansaw was hurrying toward Silent Sam's cabin as fast as long strides could take him thither.

"Hold on!" halloed the Rosebud.

Arkansaw jerked loose from his hand and strode on.

With a muttered oath the irritated man threw himself before him.

"In the name of Queen Merta, I command you to stop!" he said sternly.

Arkansaw came to a sudden halt.

"You go on like a mad wolf an' never look behind you," the Rosebud continued. "Yer eyes ar' like an owl's. Look over yer shoulder an' tell me ef you see anything crouched by the clump ov sage we've jes' passed."

Arkansaw obeyed, and his eyes flashed as they dilated.

"I'll tell you in a minute, Rosebud."

As he spoke he whipped out his bowie and catching it by its sharp point whirled for a throw.

"Jehosaphat! it might be one ov my red boys," exclaimed the Rosebud.

But The Man with the Knife pushed the arm of intervention aside, and before it could return to intercede further, the bowie shot through the moonlight.

A sharp cry answered the throw, and a figure sprung up only to fall back and lie perfectly still beside the clump of bushes twenty feet away.

The two friends looked into each other's eyes for an instant, and then Arkansaw bounded toward his target.

"It was small game but the bite of young rattlesnakes is death," said Arkansaw answering the Rosebud's look. "We must get outen this. Thet cry roused the diggin's," and striding away he led his friend a rapid beat toward the gulch.

As they were obliged to cross the road that led from Lodeton to the Bar, Arkansaw suddenly halted and pointed toward the distant mining town.

"Ah!" exclaimed he, "ef the Queen of Fate knew who my bowie killed back thar, she'd smile in her sleep to-night, an' the man in the armory 'd mount his horse an' come hyar."

The Rosebud was almost bursting with impatience.

"Who did you strike?" he cried, as his great bronze hand tightened on the knife-thrower's arm.

"His right bower!—his life-guard—the young Injun!"

"Catana?"

"Wal, I should smile."

"Thet blow will strike ez deep ez the tyeft ov the secret diary did," the Rosebud said. "When we go back—"

"Another man from Lodeton!" he interrupted. "Mebbe it ar' the cap'n himself."

The two worthies looked down the mountain road. They were so near together that not only their shoulders, but their mustaches touched.

The road to Lodeton was hard, almost flinty. A horse was coming on at a gallop—a horse whose feet were accustomed to mountain passes, for his gallop was uniform; not a hoof slipped.

All at once the men separated, and, like the sentinels of an army, they watched and listened for the enemy.

"He must stop hyar," came Arkansaw's voice across the narrow way. "The old signal, Rose-

bud. It does me good to give it to you ag'in. If it is the cap'n we'll go back an' git her blessin' to-morrow."

On came the night rider, apparently eager to reach his destination, and all at once he and his horse loomed up between the two men like an apparition.

At the same instant two figures darted at the bridle-rein, and the horse with a snort of terror reeled from the sight.

"Draw or die!" cried the comrades in one breath.

A laugh full of music was the answer, and from the slender figure that leaned forward to peer into their faces the men started with ejaculations of astonishment.

"The Queen ov Fate! by the jumpin' jingo!" fell from Arkansaw's lips.

"Queen Merta!" cried the Rosebud.

Just then the moon emerging from a curtain of cloud showered her soft light upon the scene, and the handsome face of the woman in the saddle was revealed.

"So you have met again?" she said, glancing from the Rosebud to Arkansaw, on whom her dark eyes rested. "I thought—"

"Thet Arkansaw hed gone back on ye, eh?" interrupted the bowie-king. "No! Queen; Look at thet toothpick," and his eyes blazed as he held the bowie up in the moonlight. "I hev'n't forgot my old cunnin'. I war jes' sayin' to the Rosebud thet you'd smile in yer sleep ter-night, ef you knowed whom I struck."

"Well, who was it?" asked the woman, eagerly, but with some emotion.

"The young Injun—his right bower."

The Queen of Fate seemed to frown.

"I wish you had spared him a little longer," she said. "We'll all be together before long."

"Will he come hyar?"

"Yes."

Arkansaw's eyes fairly sparkled.

"I'm gittin' back to my normal condition!" he said.

CHAPTER X.

HALLECK AND HIS FOES.

GOLD CONRAD'S enemy, the Queen of Fate, had ridden from Lodeton to Vulture Bar for a purpose.

She had encountered, unexpectedly, as we have seen, the two men who had served her before. The meeting, if not foreseen, was not an unwelcome one, although the announcement of Catana's death had brought a frown to the woman's face.

"Then," she said, after a long pause, looking at the Rosebud and Arkansaw, "then, if such things have happened at the Bar, perhaps I should not keep on just now."

"I think you should not, Queen," the Rosebud said, in which opinion The Man with the Knife concurred with a look. "Things ar' terribly torn up thar jes' now. I would wait awhile—until he comes, mebbe. We ar' gittin' things in apple-pie order. Arkansaw hez diskivered the fuse—"

"Ah!" interrupted Merta, opening her eyes.

"An' I've 'fixed' it, too," said Arkansaw. "They can't work it; but, let me tap the cap

once, yes, jes' let me tap it, an'—whew! I'll make these old mountains shake."

The woman smiled, but it was the smile of anticipated vengeance. It added a new and more intense sparkle to her wonderful eyes.

"If I must not go on, now, whither must I go?" she asked.

"I'll show yer," said the Rosebud, grasping the bridle and leading the steed toward the gulch, whither, an hour before, he had sent his red allies.

Arkansaw followed the couple with his penetrating and thoughtful eyes fixed on the figure in the saddle.

"Ef the Queen only knowed what I think I am sure ov, wouldn't she be fur goin' on to the Bar? Why, the Rosebud an' Arkansaw, strong ez they ar', couldn't begin to hold 'er back," and the bowie-king grinned as he spoke.

A few minutes later Merta's horse, still guided by the man from the Pink Forks, entered the rocky gulch.

"You've never seen my pards?" the Rosebud said, looking up into her face as he halted.

"No."

A signal, a mere bird-call as it seemed, fell from his lips, and the waiting Utes sprung from their hiding-places.

Merta only slightly started.

"This is yer Queen ez she is ourn," said the Rosebud, by way of introduction, as he waved his hand toward the woman on the horse. "You ar' in her sarvice like Arkansaw an me ar', an' ef necessary—an' it may be—you must shed yer last drop ov blood fer her."

The Indians gathered around the woman and swore to devote their lives to her.

"I am not going to lack for allies," she said under her breath. "I have more than I want. But I sent a certain person ahead. Have you seen him?"

The question was addressed aloud to the two partners; they exchanged rapid glances.

"Yes, we've both seen him," Arkansaw answered.

"Where is he now?" asked the Queen.

"Back yonder among the wolves. But never mind him; he'll take care ov himself."

The answer was vague. It is true that Halleck was "back yonder," as Arkansaw termed it; but the exact situation of the young man was unknown to him. Had it been known, he might not have replied to Merta's question in such reassuring words.

"Shoot your way to Halleck through the body that covers him. Fire!"

These were the last commands we heard from Colonel Thunder's lips.

The reader will recollect the event that called them forth.

Esmer had thrown herself between Halleck and the leveled weapons of the colonel's men, and, startled for a moment, her guardian, mad with rage, had uttered the fatal word:

"Fire!"

But not a pistol-shot filled the mine with its thousand reverberations, not a hand went up to level a revolver at her heart.

"Ar' you traitors?" thundered the irate colonel. "Must the life ov a boy stan' between you an' duty to the cap'n?"

"A boy, cunnel?" ventured one of the boldest. "The most ov us hev knowed fur a long time thet Esmer is a gal, an' we can't kil sech a creature. Ef it ar' ag'in' duty, why, we can't help it!"

The man's words did not allay Colonel Thunder's excitement; he was still a tiger, seeing nothing but the prey that was about to be torn from his clutches.

"I'll do it myself!" he exclaimed, cocking his revolver as he sprung forward. "Stan' aside, Esmer, an' let me at the Queen's spy."

The girl's answer was a defiant flashing of her restless eyes; but she did not stir.

"Touch him if you dare!" she said, sternly. "I am here to defend him, and to kill the person who attempts his life."

Her pistol covered the man she addressed; the light of the torches enabled him to look into the barrel.

All this scene had passed in the short space of three minutes, during which time Halleck was recovering his bewildered senses.

"But one life is sought here: two must not be sacrificed!" he suddenly exclaimed as he pushed Esmer gently aside and stepped to the front. "Now, if you, coward-like, take the life of an unarmed man, I am at your mercy. But they say, and I have helped to confirm the report, that Colonel Thunder fights only those equally armed with himself. Pardon me if I have lied!"

The eyes of Gold Conrad's man sunk to the ground abashed; but only for a second.

"Throw him a weapon!" he said to his men.

Five hands went forward simultaneously, and five revolvers fell at Halleck's feet.

The young man did not disdain the offer of assistance, but stooped and caught up two of the weapons.

A look of superiority beamed in his orbs as he rose and faced Colonel Thunder.

"I am ready for you," was his challenge.

"But I am not for you," was the strange reply. "If you will restore the revolvers I'll promise to meet you at some future time."

"Agreed!" said Halleck, throwing down the pistols. "I didn't come to the Bar to fight you, particularly, Colonel Thunder; but as you are his friend, you will always find me ready to meet you."

A mad flash of Thunder's eye was the only answer.

Suddenly they fell upon his *protegee*.

"What ar' you goin' to do?" he exclaimed.

"Ar' you goin' to take up with the Queen ov Fate's spy, or ar' you goin' to stick by me?"

"We will meet again," said Esmer in a basty undertone to Halleck before she answered her enraged questioner. "But for your sake I hope that meeting will not take place here. I am strangely bound to that man. I must go to him."

"Go!" merely said Halleck.

Esmer's hand touched his as she started across the space that separated her from Colonel Thunder.

The men had already recovered their revolvers, and Thunder had turned away.

"If I would fight Gold Conrad, I must fight those fellows as well," Halleck murmured.

"Well, I will not shirk. The Queen's spy? I can afford to be called that since she hates the same man I do."

The torches disappeared, but Halleck had followed them to the opening of the mine. He was once more beneath the canopy of the heavens, and not far from the spot where Thunder and his minions had recently seized him.

He paused in the starlight for a few moments and listened to the noises made by the departing band.

"I am not safe here at present," he murmured. "I will seek the hills. Among them I can plan in safety, and then I must be near the girl who risked her life to-night for me."

Halleck hurried away, but a short time afterward he halted suddenly, and then sprung back from an object that lay in his path. This object had a human shape, and, as it lay still, the young man ventured to examine it.

"What!" he exclaimed, as he turned the body over. "Catana? Who has taken coveted vengeance from me? Ah! I see. The Man with the Knife has been here. Then he hates all who served Gold Conrad. The Queen of Fate hates them, too, as I do. What is this mystery?" and Halleck gazed strangely and with a perceptible shudder into the cold face of his young Indian enemy.

CHAPTER XI.

HOODWINKED.

It was the evening of the next day, and eighty miles from Vulture Bar a man with an anxious face stood in the shadow of a great hill and looked eagerly westward.

He was apparently waiting for some one, for he was growing restless, and every now and then he cursed the ill-luck that brought nobody to his side.

In short, this man was Gold Conrad, and he was waiting and watching for Catana, his Indian, the bearer of his first message to the Bar.

Night fell about him, the stars came out, and over the rim of the far-away horizon peeped the resplendent moon.

"Curse the laggard!" cried the magnate of Lodeton. "He was to have been here before this hour. What keeps the scarlet dog?"

His question was answered by the sound of hoofs that came from the west, and a gleam of satisfaction lit up his eyes.

"Coming at last, the rascal!" he exclaimed, starting forward; but a minute later he went back with a cry of astonishment and drew a pistol.

The person was not Catana, but a stalwart fellow who sat astride of a heated horse, and Gordon had seen at a glance that this man's face was concealed by a mask.

The eyes that glittered beneath the dark fabric that formed the mask saw Gold Conrad at the very moment of his discovery.

"Hello!" said the two men simultaneously, and the rider drew rein and leaned forward.

"Gold Conrad, by the stars!" he exclaimed. "You must hev knowed thet I war comin'," and the speaker chuckled.

"No, sir; I was not waiting for *you*," Gordon answered; and, with a proud curling of his lips,

he added: "And besides, I never make engagements with people who hide their faces."

"Oh, you don't! Then I'll go on an' you kin wait fur the next man from the Bar."

The tone was a careless one, and the hands of the unknown quietly gathered up the reins.

From the Bar? A messenger from Colonel Thunder, perhaps. Gold Conrad started.

"If you are from the Bar, you are for me," he said, quickly.

"Jes' ez you like it. I didn't swear thet I would give you the message I hev on my kar-biss."

Curiosity was almost devouring Gordon.

"A message! Quick! let me have it."

The eyes under the mask seemed to have a triumphant twinkle, and eagerly watched Gold Conrad, as he snatched the piece of paper from the hand that extended it.

"You can't read it hyar!" said the mask.

"We'll see!" and Gordon glanced over his shoulder at the moon. "I haven't lost my eyesight, and besides I've read by moonlight before."

Fortunately the handwriting was large and plain, and Conrad mastered it as it seemed with a single glance.

It was a short message but one that made him grow pale.

"You are wanted here *at once*. The crisis is at hand. Catana is dead!"

THUNDER.

Gold Conrad looked up at the eyes that regarded him.

"What has happened at the bar? Tell me."

"I am obeyin' orders. I was not to tell you anything. The cunnel will do thet."

Gordon looked disappointed.

"But my faithful Indian is dead. Was he murdered?"

"They found him with a great big bowie stab. The knife must hev been thrown at him."

Gordon shuddered and grated his teeth.

"The man with the knifel!" he muttered. "By Jove! I will make short work of him! So the crisis is at hand? Good! I saw yesterday that it was coming. Now I will not shirk it. I will go at once."

The last sentence was spoken aloud, and to the messenger from Vulture Bar.

"I thought you would," was the reply.

"When can you go back?" Conrad asked.

"Any time; but not on this horse."

"Of course not. I'll furnish the horses. Come."

Gold Conrad turned and walked rapidly toward Lodeton which was not far away.

He entered this house, put some private papers in his bosom and went to the stables. While he was in the house the messenger, still masked, stood on the porch waiting for him. All at once a toad hopped into the moonlight from beneath the house and began his usual quest for food. The eyes of the man sparkled at sight of the little animal, and when it stopped about twenty-five feet from him he drew a huge bowie from his belt and threw it carelessly at the little creature.

Over and over went the blade, its polished surface scintillating in the moonlight, and a moment later it cruelly pinned the toad to the

ground! The knife-thrower seemed to rejoice at his feat, and taking several hasty strides toward the spot, he quietly resumed his weapon.

A short time afterward Gordon appeared, mounted and leading another horse by the bridle.

"We will go now. Can we reach the Bar by sundown to-morrow?"

"We kin try," was the response, as the messenger vaulted upon the back of the horse brought from the stables for his use. "Now we're off, cap'n."

Lodeton was asleep, or apparently so. Not a figure was seen by the two men as they began their journey.

As they galloped by a certain pretentious house Conrad turned his head and looked at it. His face had a mingled expression of contempt and triumph, and turning quickly upon his companion, he found his eyes fixed on the same house.

"I wonder how Queen Merta gets along?" Conrad said, smiling.

"Oh, the Queen? Is thet her shanty?"

"That is where she lives, but one doesn't see her much of late. She doesn't like me, I fancy," and Gold Conrad tried to laugh, but it was apparent that his thoughts were far from the subject.

Side by side, when the mountain road was wide enough, the two men galloped toward the Bar. Conrad no longer paid attention to his guide. The hours sped away, but they did not halt, and morning found them still among the silver mountains of the San Juan country.

Daylight showed Conrad the figure and dress of his guide—the former was burly and strength itself, the latter commonplace and unsuspecting. When the road was narrow, the messenger went ahead.

The day witnessed a few brief halts to rest themselves and their steeds, and night overtook them near their journey's end.

All at once the guide drew rein.

"I must leave you hyar," he said, looking at Conrad. "Yonder is the Bar," and he stretched out an arm famous for its great length. "You know whar the colonel lives. 'You've been hyar afore, I believe."

Gordon nodded.

"I will pay you for your work," he said. "All you have to do is to mention this service to me, and—"

"Oh, I'm paid already," was the interruption. "I obey orders; thet's my duty."

A wave of the bronze hand that had held a rein for forty-eight hours bade Gold Conrad adieu, and the next moment he was alone.

Eagerness carried him quickly forward, and halting a few minutes later before Colonel Thunder's door, he shouted for its master.

The summons was almost immediately answered, for the door flew open and the stalwart figure of his man appeared on the threshold. There was a strange, mad flash in Thunder's eyes, and for a moment he stared at the face before him.

Then recognizing it all at once he uttered an oath of surprise.

"Stay back!" he threw over his shoulder in whispers to some one in the interior of the cabin,

and then, shutting the door, he sprung to Gordon's side.

"In the name of Hades, what brought you to the Bar at this time?" he exclaimed. "They're all hyar, an' the crisis hez come, an'—"

"That's what you said in your message."

"My what, cap'n?"

"Why, the message you sent by the man who wore a mask."

Another start, and a maniacal stare that paled Gold Conrad's cheeks.

"I sent no message. I hev'n't written a line fur a year! You've been hoodwinked, cap'n."

Gordon seemed about to fall from his horse.

"I 'lowed they war up to suthin," Colonel Thunder went on. "I've met the devil with the fourteen-inch bowie, an' hyar's his mark," and the speaker smiled as he exhibited a bandaged shoulder to the staring eyes of his master. "He missed his mark; but poor Catana! he didn't miss!"

Gold Conrad groaned.

"They're all hyar, I say."

"All?"

"Yes, Arkansaw the Rosebud, an' his red pards, the boy Halleck, an' the Queen uv Fate."

"Merta here?"

"Hyar, ez I'm livin'! But since you ar' hyar, cap'n, we will face 'em understandin'ly. A man with his face hid fetched you a note from me, eh?"

"Yes; your name was signed to it."

"It's the Queen's work. The man war either Arkansaw, er the Rosebud."

"Would to fortune that I had suspected as much," sighed Gordon.

"Too late now. We must face the music."

"And win!" and Gordon's hand descended on Colonel Thunder's shoulder, with an emphasis not to be mistaken. "Stand by me, colonel, till we sweep this league of reptiles from our path. I know, or I thought, this day would come, and I thank my star that it finds me ready for the fray. No mercy! not even to the boy."

"He's a brick, cap'n. I've seen 'im tried. His mother's blood fires his heart. Beware ov thet young tiger."

"Pshaw!" and Gordon laughed. "Where are your men?"

"Near by. We'll hold a caucus about midnight. You're tired."

"Yes. I'm not used to such long rides. You have a cot in your cabin, colonel?" and Gold Conrad began to dismount.

"That cabin isn't the place fur you even ef it ar' mine!" said Colonel Thunder hastily as he cast an anxious glance over his shoulder at the door, still closed. "Silent Sam hez an extra bed, an', besides, his shanty ar' the best place fur the caucus," and before Gordon could reply Thunder was leading his horse away.

The captain of the watch-dogs would have disputed his master's entrance to his cabin with the bowie and the revolver, and that, too, when its only occupant was Esmer.

CHAPTER XII.

THE KNIFE AT THE CAUCUS.

THE "caucus" referred to by Colonel Thunder had assumed formidable proportions by

twelve o'clock that night. One by one the desperadoes of the Bar arrived at Silent Sam's, and were greeted by the penetrating eyes of Conrad Gordon. He eyed each one as if he would read his very thoughts, and if a face had been masked he would have exposed it if death had followed the next minute.

Some of the watch-dogs had never seen Gold Conrad before, and first impressions were not favorable ones. They did not like his looks although he was their master. They wanted only one leader—Colonel Thunder.

When the colonel came he introduced his master separately to the swarthy five, and told them that he would open the meeting.

Gold Conrad gave the crowd a quick but searching glance as he left the three-legged stool upon which he had seated himself after the introduction, and began:

"Our interests are at stake!" he said. "If we do not strike first we will be struck and destroyed. There are those in our midst to-night who seek to wrest Vulture Bar from us; they have already killed, and the knife of one of their number has pierced Colonel Thunder's shoulder. We came together to counsel in regard to our safety; we must step on the serpents' heads; we must crush them, and to do this we must strike first and effectually. I came here not to lead you, but to be led by the man you love to follow—my old companion of other days—Colonel Thunder."

The colonel smiled grimly at this compliment.

"We were together when the chief actors in our proposed destruction formed a league—ten years ago. They did not succeed then because we baffled them. We had silver mines then just as we have now, we—"

Conrad Gordon paused, for he had caught Colonel Thunder's glance which, rapid as a flash of lightning, had spoken volumes. It seemed to say:

"Don't tell too much about our past, cap'n. The boys went back on me the other night. Keep 'em in the dark."

"This is what the colonel's lips would have said if they had uttered the sentiments of his eyes:

"Well, in short we have been followed, dogged by an avenging triad for ten years," Gordon went on. "A fourth has been added to the league, also some Indians from the Tinaja country. Two of this number, I learn, you have seen—the demon with the bowie and the boy. The other two are not far away. As I said before, we must crush this league."

A kind of applause followed the last sentence, and Thunder's eyes said:

"You've said enough for the present, cap'n. Now, let me sail in."

Gordon stepped back and resumed his seat as the stalwart figure of his head watch-dog strode to the center of the room. He shrugged his broad shoulders much after the manner of a bear, as he halted beside the barrel on which stood the several contributions from Whisky Jose's bar which had been "sampled" previous to the opening of the caucus.

"We must have revenge!" he exclaimed, in his hoarse tone, which so well suited his rough personnel. "They want the cap'n's blood;

they've hed some ov mine; they want to ruin the Bar. Shet they do it?"

The speaker's eye took in the group before him as he put the question, and as five men sprung up a thundering "No!" seemed to shake the roof.

"Swear to spare none!" continued the colonel. "When I say none, I don't exempt the boy. We war fools the other night; we hed the wolf in the trap and opened the door fur him."

Gold Conrad's eyes gleamed with intense satisfaction. The beauty of Queen Merta would not turn the Six Revolvers from the path of vengeance; and when he recollected how powerful it had been in days gone by, he rejoiced that the time had come when it could not make traitors of his adherents.

All at once something that had a glitter passed like an arrow over the uplifted bowies, and with a dull thud buried itself in the ace of hearts!

Those who looked a moment saw that it was an immense knife whose blade would have measured fourteen inches!

A wild cry greeted this startling interruption of the proceedings, and with one accord every man wheeled toward the door.

To the surprise of all it stood wide open, and in the light of the cabin lamp appeared two giants whose broad shoulders touched each other, so close their masters stood together.

Arkansaw and the Rosebud! Gold Conrad knew them well.

A defiant smile lurked in Arkansaw's eyes, as well as under his dark mustache, and several bowies sought the Revolvers' belts. At the same time Rosebud's arms rose displaying two immense "navys" at their end.

"Ef it isn't fight, mebbe, this will rile ye," said The Man with the Knife, and he tossed a piece of paper toward the barrel. "It ar' fur Conrad Gordon; but it 'tain't no secret."

Gold Conrad went forward and mechanically picked up the paper. He seemed to know whence it came for his eyes flashed as he took it up.

The next moment he had unfolded it and read:

"MY ENEMY:—

"We are all together once more. You have kept your secret well for ten years. Tell me where my child is before I strike. MERTA, QUEEN OF FATE."

Gordon threw the message at Colonel Thunder with a contemptuous sneer which to the two pards at the door meant defiance.

Thunder glanced over it and a strange light beamed in his eyes when he mastered the last sentence.

"Here, take it back to its author," cried Gold Conrad, and an instant later the rejected message fell at Arkansaw's feet. "My answer is the hatred I have given her through the ten years of which she prates. Let her find her child—if she can!" and the speaker laughed victoriously.

"Hev it yer own way," answered The Man with the Knife. "I've got back to my normal condition, and I've quit throwin' the knife fur amusement. Ask Colonel Thunder ef I haven't."

Thunder bit his mustache and looked death at the speaker through his dark eyelashes.

"Now, good-night, my honeysuckles," con-

tinued Arkansaw, "Take my advice; go on with yer meetin' an' don't foller us, fur you might accidentally run ag'in' the pint ov a bowie."

The two men backed slowly from the light.

Not one of the conclave ventured to follow, and for several minutes after the twain's departure pale face looked into pale face speechless and awe-stricken.

"His knife can't kill all!" suddenly cried Gold Conrad, flushing when he thought of the pards' escape. "We stand here like a band of fools frightened by a shadow. Follow them! trail them! they will lead us to the Queen's hiding-place; then for the vengeance that satisfies."

He strode toward the door, but as he passed Colonel Thunder a hand touched his arm and a voice whispered:

"Don't make a fool ov yerself, cap'n. You an' me wouldn't git ten steps from Silent Sam's before—whiz! whirr! an' good-by Lodeton and Vulture Bar."

The colonel's words had the desired effect. Gold Conrad stopped.

"What would you do?" he asked.

"In the first place, adjourn the caucus."

"And in the second place?"

"Go to sleep and think until I see you to-morrow."

Gordon stared into Thunder's face a minute before he spoke.

"I will," he said, at length. "I will see you—"

"To-morrow."

Fifteen minutes later Silent Sam and Gold Conrad were the sole occupants of the cabin.

Colonel Thunder and his men had departed, and Queen Merta's enemy pretended to doze in the cabin.

All at once he rose and glided to the door. Lifting the latch, he crept out into the moonlight.

"He says I mustn't see him till to-morrow; but I can't wait. I saw the strange light that came into his eyes when he read that sentence in which Merta spoke of her child. I believe he knows something, and if he does I shall know it before morning."

Conrad Gordon moved toward Colonel Thunder's cabin and soon afterward tapped on the door. A sound inside responded, and the oaken portal was opened, not by the leader of his watch-dogs, but by Esmer.

The girl started and uttered a cry of surprise as her eyes fell upon the figure in the moonshine, and she was about to shut the door when Gordon darted at her and grasped her shoulder.

"What! you alive?" he cried, dragging her into the light. "You've got her face, her eyes; in short, her infernal beauty!" By Jove! I ought to finish the job I did years ago, and then I ought to dispose of the man who has deceived me. Let you live that she may embrace you when she has completed her revenge? Never! that shall not be!"

Esmer saw the revolver that flew from her assailant's belt; she heard the ominous click of the lock, and then—

A tigerish cry of rage at her left, the descent of a human body upon Conrad Gordon, and the sharp report of a pistol.

The next moment Esmer, released, staggered toward the cabin, while Gold Conrad reeled from the smoking weapon clutched in Halleck's hand.

CHAPTER XIII.

TWO REVELATIONS.

"MERCIFUL Heaven! is it you? Go! do not let him find you here when he comes back, and I've been looking for him for an hour. Go! it is Esmer, the waif, that talks. He and his tigers must not find you. I say they must not!"

Halleck looked into the eyes of the beautiful speaker in a dazed sort of manner. The girl's hand was on his arm, and her orbs were full of resistless pleading.

The young man took no notice of the person who had staggered with a cry of pain from the muzzle of his revolver. He saw Gold Conrad no longer, saw nobody but the *protegee* of Colonel Thunder.

"I owe you my life!" she went on. "I cannot tell you all my gratitude now, for you are in danger while you stand here. I could not repeat the experience of the mine and live. They have taken a new oath—the colonel and his Revolvers. You belong to the league—to Queen Merta's avenging band—and you have the same enemies that she possesses. But I keep you here—to die, perhaps! Go! go! let me meet him alone when he returns."

Halleck found himself pushed from the excited speaker, but still he lingered.

"I think I could tell you something," he said. "I think I have discovered a secret that might change your whole life."

Esmer bounded toward him, and was about to question him when a sound came over the little hill.

"Keep it!" she exclaimed. "Keep it, I say, and go now, that you may tell it to me to-morrow or next day. They are coming back—Colonel Thunder and his minions."

Determined to drive Halleck from the spot, she turned toward the cabin and threw him a glance of love and command from the door before she disappeared.

At that moment a coarse laugh greeted the young man's ears.

Halleck hesitated no longer, but sprung away and hurried toward the mines.

The events of the last few moments had blotted Gold Conrad from his memory as it were. He did not think of him until he was a goodly distance from the spot.

Then he came to a halt.

"What have I done?" he asked himself. "I have killed Gold Conrad. I have robbed Queen Merta of her revenge, balked all her plans."

To Halleck the situation was by no means pleasant. He looked back toward the Bar, and then forward at the lofty hills whose depths were silver and gold-mines.

To go forward would be to encounter the woman whom he had just robbed of vengeance; to turn back, would be to throw himself before the Six Revolvers bound now by a new oath.

He went on until he found himself in the presence of a handsome woman who stood in the light of a fire that illumined a disused mine.

"I've been waiting for you," she said,

Halleck tried to avoid her piercing orbs as he went forward lest they should read in his looks the events of the last few minutes.

"Come here!" she said, in a tone of command, as she smiled faintly at his strange action. "Arkansaw and Rosebud are not here. I want to tell you something—something about a being of whom you have thought and dreamed a thousand times."

Halleck started with a cry which it would have been hard to have suppressed.

"My mother!" he exclaimed, as he came forward. "Tell me something about her; but oh! tell me the truth. He, the man whom we both hate, calls me the son of an Apache woman, and Colonel Thunder, learning the lie from his master, has intimated the same thing. But you will give the lie to all such slanders. You will vindicate her character."

Merta watched Halleck strangely while he spoke, and at the same time she seemed to be putting her story into proper shape. The old light—the flashes of revenge that lit up her dark eyes gradually gave place to a softer look that rendered her none the less beautiful.

"It is a lie," she said. "I knew your mother, and I know too well the man whose son you are. You were born in an Indian lodge, your godfather was Running Wolf, the war chief of the Apache nation, and your earliest playmates were the naked children of that mighty tribe."

Halleck's head fell in shame.

"Then," he said, forgetting the Queen's first words, "then my mother was—"

"She was not!" was the interruption. "And he should be the last man to call you an Indian. There is Spanish blood in your veins."

"So Esmer thought."

"Esmer?" asked the Queen, mechanically, as if the name had some strange attraction for her; but seeing that Halleck made no reply, she continued: "You first saw the light of day in an Apache wigwam because your mother was driven from home by the fiend who had already blighted her life—the villain who, not content with such infamy, robbed me of all that I held dear in life—a little child. Your mother was beautiful; she clung to you until one night among the mountains that overlooked the Apache camp, she was found by a few warriors, dead! She had taken you with her, and you had disappeared. You cannot remember?"

"No," said Halleck. "My recollection does go back to an Indian camp; but it belonged to the Comanches, not the Apaches. I wandered up and down the Rio Grande until I fell in with our enemy and became his slave."

"Yes; you became his slave and I his hunter," said Merta, as her eyes flashed again. "I bided my time, for I knew that you would become his enemy. He hates you because"—she caught Halleck's arm and almost hissed—"because you look like your mother!"

"And I hate him now because he killed her!"

Queen Merta stepped proudly back and gazed at the young man whose blood she had made as hot as boiling water.

"Ah!" she exclaimed, "if you knew another thing your hate might vanish and before morning you might seek his side and tell him that you forgave."

"Never!"

"You might turn from me and leave me to carry out my revenge alone."

"Never, Queen! I know enough to make my hate eternal. You could not strengthen it, nor could any revelation break its force."

"Do not be too hasty," Merta said, advancing again, with her eyes fixed on Halleck. "Rash vows are bad ones. Would you hate your father with a hatred that seeks blood?"

"My father?"

"Conrad Gordon!"

The Queen of Fate uttered the name in an impressive tone, and at the same time eagerly watched its effect.

Halleck had expected the revelation; he did not start back and utter any cry; but stood still in his tracks and dropped his head. But Merta saw his eyes through his long, black lashes.

"Your father!" she said, touching him gently. "Did I stun you?"

He looked up.

"No!" was the answer. "I am not sorry that I met him an hour since."

"What! you met him?" she exclaimed. "Where?"

"Back there—at the Bar. Fate made me the avenger."

There was a strange, wild look in Halleck's eyes.

"You met him—my old foe? You encountered him, you mean! you had words!—you—"

"I killed him!"

These three words fell on Queen Merta's ears like the knell of death.

She staggered from the speaker and stood a few feet away like a statue of horror. Her eyes seemed ready to burst from their sockets. Halleck lost his color, too.

"You kill him? you? you?" suddenly broke from her lips. "He was mine! I swore that I would take his life. He wronged me more than he wronged you. He slew your mother, but he widowed me and stole my child—my little Inez. I have shadowed him for ten years, and in a thousand ways I have stabbed him to let him know that vengeance slept not. I had a motive in all this. I still hoped that he would reveal the secret he has guarded so well; but now you have sealed his lips—you! Do you know what my second great oath was? I swore that I would slay the person that took his life, and you have baffled me, you have made the life-hunt of Queen Merta one that will last forever!"

She sprung at Halleck as she uttered the last word. He recoiled, but the flashing eyes before him told him that it would be death to attempt to draw.

"You—Halleck! his son!" she cried. "You would not spare him for me. Why did you kill him? Did you discover that—"

"No! I killed him to save your child's life—the life of your Inez—the Esmer who told me I had Spanish blood in my veins."

The effect of these words was magical.

A cry welled from her lips, and her look once more became a wild stare.

"What do you say?" she suddenly cried. "You killed him to save my child—my Inez? Where is she?"

Before Halleck could reply, two burly men sprung into the cavern, and he heard the rough voice of Arkansaw.

"We've got to hurry up matters, Queen," he said. "The wolves hev been fallin' out 'mong themselves. Gold Conrad hez been winged, fur Silent Sam ar' dressin' his wound at his shanty."

Queen Merta and Halleck exchanged significant looks.

"Vengeance, I thank you!" she ejaculated. "You are still preserving him for the Queen of Fate. Halleck, your very revolver is in my service. Remember: he is mine!" and with the last word she turned to the two men.

"Hyar's yer note, Queen," said the bowie-kick extending his hand with a piece of paper in it. "The Rosebud an' I carried it down to the korkiss, but he sent it back, an' without his compliments, either. However, I left mine thar—a toothpick stickin' in one ov Sam's lucky kerds!" and the man finished his sentence in a broad grin.

Queen Merta took the paper, and, tearing it up, threw it at her feet.

CHAPTER XIV.

A BOWIE FINDS A HEART.

THAT same night three Indians well mounted rode over the mountain road toward Lodeton. They wore no plumes; but their long black hair hung undressed down their backs; they were clad, too, in garments demi-civilized; but out of their eyes looked the fiery nature of the savage. Each carried a rifle across the saddle-bow, and within reach of their red hands was the deadly revolver which they could handle so well.

Their general make-up told that they had set out on an important expedition. The last words of the beautiful woman who had just dismissed them still rung in their ears; and they still saw in imagination the flashing eyes and the heaving bosom of the Queen of Fate.

Silence now reigned in the cavern which we have just left. The only figure in the flickering firelight belonged to Gold Conrad's female foe. She sat on a rock and appeared to be watching the flickering of the fire; but if her look was a strange one, for one of her temperament, it was evident that thought was at work.

"Inez! Inez! is it true that you are near me?" she suddenly exclaimed, starting up. "Where is he? I will ask him more. He shall tell me all he knows."

Stepping back among the shadows of the mine, she called the name of Halleck several times, but received no response.

"He walked by me while I was thinking; he could do that," she said, withdrawing, disappointed. "Why did I not see him? If he has found my child, he has gone to her. I will find her, too."

A moment later the figure of Queen Merta went toward the Bar. The place was not unknown to her, for once or twice she had visited it in disguise and knew it as well as Halleck did. This time she did not look like herself; her face had been purposely blackened with the dirt of the mine, and her upper lip was ornamented by a jet-black mustache which did not appear out of place. Clad in the suit which she wore so

well and in which she had made the journey to the Bar, she looked like a young miner. But beneath her jacket a heart which she could not control was beating wildly, and above the mustache a pair of handsome eyes were burning intensely.

Silent Sam's cabin was not wholly unknown to her, and going up to its little window, Merta ventured to peer into the room. She saw the bowie that still perforated the ace of hearts, and then her gaze fell upon the figure of a man on a stool. His forehead was bound by a red handkerchief, and as he sat in the light of the lamp still on the barrel, the Queen of Fate studied him with blazing orbs.

It was Conrad Gordon.

Lying on a cot in the darkest corner of the room was Silent Sam, the guardian of the fuse, apparently asleep; but the avenger at the window saw only the man on the stool.

"To-morrow and to-morrow night!" she hissed as she withdrew. "Dream on, plan on, my enemy; the vengeance that has not slept for ten years strikes the blow that ruins and kills to-morrow night."

Unconscious of the presence of the Queen, Gold Conrad continued in his abstracted mood, while she with a lighter step hurried away.

Suddenly she came to a halt, and stooped in the shadow of a clump of bushes—a shadow cast by the moon.

She saw a figure emerge from the last cabin, and as it passed near her, her watching eyes saw that it was Halleck's.

Queen Merta bounded toward the hut when the young man had disappeared; but when near the door, she stopped and surveyed her masculine dress.

"I must see her!" she said, going on again. "She cannot know me in this garb, even if Halleck has told her all. Inez, Inez, I am nearer than you dream."

She went on and halted at the door of Colonel Thunder's cabin. For a moment she listened there, and then rapped lightly.

"Who's there?" came from the interior of the cabin.

"Halleck," answered the Queen, imitating the young man's tone to perfection. "I forgot something which is very important."

The Queen of Fate held her breath as the door began to open. She knew that Esmer's face would be in the moonlight, while hers, in the shadows, would not betray her emotions.

The next moment the bewitching face of Colonel Thunder's *protegee* appeared in the doorway.

"Come in!" Esmer said. "You must not stay long, for— Oh! you are not Halleck. I am deceived."

The Queen of Fate thrust forth her hand to prevent the closing of the door, but vainly, for Esmer had sprung back with an exclamation of fright, and shut the door in her very face. And before she could recover she heard the fall of the iron bar which told her that the door was secured against her entrance.

Merta did not breathe for several seconds; her dilated orbs stared at the door, and her white face told that she had seen a face strangely dear to her.

"You cannot come in," said Esmer from the inside. "And if you do not wish to meet Colonel Thunder, you had best move on at once."

The voice roused Queen Merta, and instead of retreating, she went forward.

"I am not Halleck, that is true; but I am his friend," she said, with a pair of pale lips at the crevice. "We hate the same person. In revenge we are inseparable."

"Then, if you do not want to fail in your vengeance—if you do not want to compromise me, you will go away," Esmer answered.

"I want to see you; I must."

"You shall not, now."

"You do not know me."

"That is true."

Merta smiled. Then Halleck had not revealed the secret.

"If you knew me you would open the door," she continued, turning to her work again.

"No, I would not," was the reply.

For a moment the Queen of Fate seemed to be fighting a mental battle.

"Put your ear as near my lips as you can," she said, as she put her hand on her bosom, as if to still her throbbing heart. "Are you listening?"

"I am."

Merta drew a long breath.

"They call you Esmer," she said; "but you are Inez—yes, Inez! *And I am your mother!*"

The Queen heard a half-stifled cry on the inside, a gasp, and then a groan, and the next moment a body seemed to sink at the foot of the door.

Then all was still.

"Heavens! I may have killed her!" gasped the avenger, listening with all her might. "And my little Inez, too!"

She dropped to the ground and listened at the crevice between step and door. Her heart seemed to beat no longer; her eyes had that mingled expression of fear and anxiety.

"I have killed her!" she cried, and then, springing up, she threw herself against the door with the ferocity of a tigress; but the heavy portal, protected by the iron bar inside, stubbornly refused to yield.

Again and again she assaulted the door, only to be received in the same manner, and, at last, she drew off.

Then she cast her eyes up at the cabin, as if she would demolish it in order to reach the young girl within. But it was too strong for her, and she could not force her way to Esmer.

All at once a footstep greeted her ear, and she turned to start violently back, as her hand darted toward the revolver near on her person.

"Draw an' drop!" came from the lips of the man who stood, giant-like, behind the revolver leveled at her heart. "You ar' my pris'ner. Stan' still!"

Queen Merta obeyed, and a single stride brought the man directly upon her.

Then his hand encircled her arm, the pistol crept nearer, and she looked over it into the face of Colonel Thunder!

"Who ar' you?" he asked. "Hold on! I like to answer my own questions."

As he spoke, he turned Merta until the moonlight fell on her face.

"A false mustache; I kin see thet," he said, after a moment's scrutiny. "An' I think—Wall by the bones ov my ancestors! I know you now. Them eyes 'd betray you anywhar."

Merta did not reply, although she saw that her disguise had been penetrated. She stood before Gold Conrad's tool in her true character.

"I knowed you war in these parts; but I di ln't expect to find you hyar," and he glanced anxiously at the cabin. "Now I want to introduce you to a sartain man."

He started off; but the hand of the Queen of Fate touched his arm.

"One moment. We are enemies," she said. "You did not expect to find me here, you say. Where else should I be?"

Colonel Thunder's eyes dilated.

Then she knew that she had a right to the girl he had guarded so well.

"We'll talk about this another time," he said. "I want you to see somebody. I'm in his sarvice, as ov old."

"When he killed and stole!" flashed the Queen.

Thunder did not reply; but hurried Merta away. A last glance and one full of longing she threw at the watch-dog's cabin, and unresistingly went with him.

Not a word fell from their lips until Colonel Thunder halted before Silent Sam's shanty.

Merta glanced into his face as if to say: "I know I am about to meet my great enemy."

A lamp was still burning in the room and the avenger's quick look saw a man sitting on a stool in the same posture that Gold Conrad had last appeared to her.

But Colonel Thunder did not give her time to prepare for the meeting close at hand, for throwing wide the door that was never locked he dashed inside with her. At the same time he uttered a cry of triumph that caused two men to spring erect—Silent Sam from his cot, and Gold Conrad from his seat.

"Ha! ha!" laughed the colonel, hoarsely. "I've found the boss nugget! No dirt on this lump, cap'n, but all solid gold. Look at 'er! isn't she a beauty?"

Conrad Gordon fixed his eyes on his watch-dog's prisoner.

"Whar ar' yer eyes?" exclaimed the colonel. "I knowed 'er in the moonshine. Them eyes 'd betray her in the dark."

At that moment a cry of recognition fell from Gold Conrad's tongue, and whipping out a revolver he sprung at the Queen of Fate.

"Settle it all, that's right! she's yourn!" said Thunder, releasing Merta and stepping back. "I'll tend to the others—the young 'un an' the two pards. Thar she stan's, cap'n, the Queen of Fate, almost too purty to kill; but too dangerous to live!"

The last word had just fallen from Colonel Thunder's lips, when Merta stepped suddenly back and tore the false mustache from her lip and threw her hat at his feet. Then her midnight hair fell over her shoulders, and her eyes, flashing as of yore, rendered her beauty striking to a degree.

"Yes!" she said. "Strike as you have struck

before, coward, an unarmed woman. I am yours, and if you were in my power, I assure you that the revolver of the Queen of Fate would not spare you one minute—not one second. I am almost at the end of my trail. I have found my child and I have killed her!"

Colonel Thunder uttered an exclamation of horror, which drew Gold Conrad's eyes to him.

"What!" he cried, springing toward the Queen. "Did you kill Esmer before I found you at the cabin?"

"Go and see! She was mine."

"Then I'll end yer trail hyar, she devil!" roared Thunder. "Stan' back, cap'n!" and his right arm pushed Gold Conrad away. "Now I'll end one act ov this play."

Merta heard the click of his revolver and saw his arm dart upward; but the next second something arrow-like shot over her shoulder, and Colonel Thunder reeled away.

At the same time she saw a figure at the door and heard a rough voice say:

"Come hyar, Queen."

She turned.

The burly figure of the Rosebud was in the doorway.

"Draw an' drop!" he said, quietly, to Silent Sam and Conrad Gordon, as Merta sprung toward him. "Me an' Arkansaw left the Howlin' Wilderness in the nick ov time didn't we, can'n?"

Gold Conrad did not reply, for Merta had joined the two figures without, yes, two, for one was The Man with the Knife. But he did not hold any bowie in his hand know; the one last held had just found the man he had missed before!

Silent Sam's first action was to spring to Colonel Thunder's side. Strong as a lion he lifted the desperado, and Gordon saw the bowie in his breast.

He was silent for a moment.

"Sam, is the fuse fixed?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Good! Now for death and victory! He is dead; her child killed by her own hands; but I live—I, Conrad Gordon, demoness! I live to triumph at last."

And with the last word he walked from the cabin.

CHAPTER XV.

WOLF RENDS WOLF.

"If she killed the girl she killed her at the cabin," said Gold Conrad to himself when he found himself in the night air and a few feet from Silent Sam's. "But might she not have lied to deceive me? Ah! I know the serpent with whom I have to deal," and he started off toward Colonel Thunder's headquarters.

His face wore the expression of the desperado who, when apparently driven to the wall, sees or thinks he sees new blows for the future—new death-strokes for his enemies.

To his surprise the door stood wide open, and he went in. A flood of moonlight permeated the place, which was deserted.

"Not here," he ejaculated. "I must hunt her elsewhere," and with but a moment's inspection of the room, he turned away.

He had not been gone ten minutes, certainly not fifteen, from Silent Sam's; but that short space of time had proved sufficient to bring a new and wild scene into being there. Loud voices, fierce oaths, and vengeful utterances, were borne to his ears from that locality.

The Queen's enemy knew what it all meant.

The watch-dogs had discovered their bowied leader.

He listened for a few moments to the bedlam wafted to his ears by the mountain winds.

It seemed as if all the Bar was there, such was the indescribable din.

"I wish I could hurl her into the midst of that mad pack!" said Gordon while he heard. "Ah! wouldn't they make short work of her? What's that? By Jove! they're coming this way; they're on the hunt."

He was not mistaken; the mob was rushing toward him headed by Colonel Thunder's five pards. Wild and uncouth though those Colorado wolves were, they almost worshiped their leader. Linked to him by a thousand desperate deeds, woe to the man or woman who had in any way helped him in his bloody exit from this world.

"They must not see me now. I will wait until they cool down. They will not find the Queen and her friends to-night."

Therefore, Gold Conrad prepared to leave the spot where he had halted; but a loud voice suddenly arrested him.

"Hold on thar!" was the cry. "Run an' we'll drop you."

He stopped with an oath.

The mob was nearer than he thought; the moonlight had betrayed him, and so he faced the avengers and waited.

After all, what had he to fear? Was he not the employer of all those men? They owed him for the bread they ate, and a flash of satisfaction lit up his eyes as he thought that by one blow of the hammer he could destroy his mines, and send them away breadless, each one to shift for himself.

"By George! it's Goldy!" exclaimed a dozen men as the mob brought up before him.

"That's just who I am," he answered. "Do you want me?"

The leaders exchanged questioning glances.

Suddenly one of the Five said:

"You war thar?"

"I was."

"What did you do to save the cunnel?"

"What could I do? Did I know that that devil and his bowie were so near? If Silent Sam were here—"

"Hyar he is!" and several hands pushed the man in question forward.

Conrad turned to the keeper of his mine of ruin.

"Tell them what I did, Sam; and tell the truth."

The mob fastened its tigerish eyes on Sam, and more than one pistol crept toward his breast.

"The truth; that's what we want. We're goin' to wipe out all thet hed a hand in the cunnel's death, an' we're goin' to be squar' with you, cap'n, for we say thet never did the men ov the Bar go more'n an ounce ov dust on ye."

For a moment Silent Sam stood between Gold Conrad and the mob, afraid to speak.

"Wal?" began the stalwart leader. "Wal, Sam, give us the story."

Thus commanded, the silent man related for the second time that night the story of the colonel's death. He had told it before to the mob congregated at the Howling Wilderness, where their doings had been witnessed by Arkansas and his companion. He told it in a manner intended to shield Gold Conrad, but a few words brought forth several startling questions.

"Didn't he hev a chance to wipe out the Queen afore the cunnel interfered?"

Sam admitted by a look that he had.

"Then the bowie would hev pricked him, eh?"

Sam did not answer; he saw the aim of the interrogators.

"What do you say now, cap'n? You hesitated; you let the cunnel interfere, an' he got the knife. An' when he got it, did you hunt us up? No. You came down hyar towards the cunnel's shanty. What fur?—the gal what he swore war a boy? We'll hev to take you in charge, cap'n."

There was a general assent to this decision, and Gordon, with sudden flashes in his eyes, stepped back as if about to resist the arrest.

But twenty bronze hands shot forward, and as many revolvers instantly covered him.

"We kin run the Bar without ye!" came over the wicked barrels. "If you bed stayed at headquarters the cunnel would be alive in his boots now. You bring death with ye every time you come hyar. Last summer you came to see us an' the same day a shaft accident killed ten men. Hev ye furgotten thet, cap'n?"

The meaning of these words could not be mistaken.

"In order to get me out of your way!" said Gold Conrad, so you can take possession of my property, you say that I might have saved the colonel and make your lie an excuse for my death. Well, I am ready when I have given my last instructions to Sam."

The mob stepped back.

Gordon was not to be feared now; he had been disarmed.

Silent Sam came forward and Conrad whispered:

"You will obey me, Sam?"

The guardian of the fuse nodded slightly.

"Go back to the cabin and hit the cap with your hammer."

The eyes of the listener sparkled which assured Gordon that one man at least in the mob respected his commands.

"That is all, Sam. Do your duty well."

Silent Sam straightened again and stepped back.

"Ar' you ready, cap'n?" asked the leader of the mob.

"I am ready."

The next moment he was seized and marched away.

Sam did not follow but turned and glided toward his own cabin.

At a rapid pace Gold Conrad was conducted

toward the hill not far from Colonel Thunder's cabin.

When the men of Vulture Bar saw the door standing wide open they exchanged significant glances and then looked at their victim.

"You war hyar since the cunnel's death, cap'n?"

"Find out if you can!" was the defiant answer.

"The gal war suthin' to you. We allus knowed thet, fur the cunnel'd never let you see her. You came hyar an' found her. Did you kill her?"

"Find out!"

A dozen fierce oaths replied, and if the arm of the leader had not dashed as many lifted revolvers aside the life of Gold Conrad would have ended then and there.

But he passed the cabin safely, and was taken over the brow of the hill and halted under a tree whose giant limb had evidently borne the hangman's fruit before.

In a moment a lasso-like rope was dangling over his head, and a noose fell upon his shoulders.

"This is fur the cunnel!" said the chief of the avengers, stepping back. "We own the Bar from this night, cap'n. The cunnel war a brick; he war our fav'rit', an' to Davy Jones's with the man who stepped back an' let him die! Pull, boys!"

The noose tightened and the rope grew taut above his head. Gold Conrad felt his body leaving the ground, and he was bracing himself for the terrible ordeal when a strange thud was heard and he fell almost upon his knees.

The three men who were pulling on the rope staggered back, and fell upon each other in a ludicrous heap, for the cord had been cut in twain, and that by a huge bowie-knife which quivered in the tree!

"That man belongs to me! I am the Queen of Fate, and I am here with my death angels to enforce my commands!"

These words, clear and distinct, fell upon the ears of the startled mob.

Every eye was turned toward the speaker.

She had spoken truly; she was not alone.

She stood between the stalwart figures of Arkansaw and the Rosebud, and at the latter's left stood two Indians.

Eight revolvers covered the mob—eight instead of ten, for one of Arkansaw's hands clutched that terrible weapon which seemed equal to an arsenal—his fourteen-inch bowie.

Halleck was not to be seen.

CHAPTER XVI.

QUEEN MERTA'S REVENGE.

THE tableau displayed to the mob was enough to make it recoil. The wolves of Vulture Bar knew that the hands that gripped the outstretched revolvers would not hesitate to send death into their midst if another arm was lifted against Gold Conrad.

The words "He is mine!" also meant "let that man alone;" and the threat that followed was almost useless.

Conrad Gordon saw his deliverers, but not

until he had glanced up at the knife in the tree—the bowie which had cut the lynchers' rope.

But while he stared at Queen Merta and her companions, he was listening for a sound that would make his heart leap for joy.

Silent Sam had reached his cabin before this; then, why had he not carried out his (Gold Conrad's) commands?

Sam had reached his cabin, tenanted only by the dead, for the body of Colonel Thunder, covered by a buffalo-robe, lay in the middle of the floor. The lamp was still burning, and taking it up Sam unfastened the door that led to the fuse room.

The next moment he had raised the trap-door and was bending over the fuse, a hammer in his hand, and his dark eyes beaming with wild delight.

Suddenly he lifted the hammer and dealt the cap a smart blow which produced a small report like the explosion of a cap of a toy pistol.

As he struck Sam leaped up and listened at the open door. A second passed away, another and another, a minute waned, five went into eternity; but no result!

What was the matter? Why had the fuse failed?

Sam's face grew long and full of disappointment as he listened. The explosion had not taken place; the mines were still in good working condition, and the demons of the Bar would find them so when they had lynched their owner.

With a mad oath Silent Sam sprung to the trap again and examined the cap. His blow had exploded it; then, why had the great scheme failed?

After a while he raised the cap, and saw—the severed wire! His eyes suddenly dilated; he stared and gasped.

Somebody had destroyed the current. He thought a moment, and then bounded from the cabin, muttering the name of The Man with the Knife!

Meanwhile, the mob under the death tree had been rendered prisonerless.

"Conrad Gordon comes here!" the Queen of Fate had commanded. "Men of Vulture Bar, let him obey me!"

A singular light flashed up in Gold Conrad's eyes at this command, and the next moment he walked forward and halted almost against the muzzles of the eight revolvers.

He seemed more than ready to exchange the lynchers' cord for the pistols of the avenging league.

When he halted, his eyes encountered the burning orbs of Queen Merta. She was victor now; an hour ago she had stood before him awaiting the blow which he had nearly dealt.

The hate of years was in the eyes of each; but the Queen of Fate mastered her passing thoughts, and glanced over Gordon's shoulder.

"Go back and bury your leader," she said to the mob. "I will attend to this man. You follow us a step at the peril of life. Go back!"

"We will on one condition," said the leader.

"Well?"

"Give us thet man," and the speaker's hand described Arkansaw, beneath whose mustache a smile was lurking.

"Ask for my right arm," replied Queen Merta. "However," she added, with a smile, "if Arkansaw desires to become your captive I shall not object."

She glanced at The Man with the Knife as she finished, and he stepped forward. At the same time his right hand went up and all saw the blade that glittered in the moonlight.

"Ef you'll let me try my new bowie I'll j'ine yer ranks," he said, in a tone that made the stoutest ruffian shudder. "All right. Silence gives consent they say, so I'll jest pick out my man."

The next moment the mob was falling back in a good deal of confusion, and the glowering look in Arkansaw's eye became a twinkle of humor.

"Hold on! I can't pick 'im out while ye're movin' thet way," he cried.

But the wolves of Vulture Bar did not obey, but stood not on the order of their going and continued to fall back.

The Man with the Knife laughed as he turned to the Queen and her companions.

"No knife-p'int in theirs ef you please," he said. "Ar' you ready, Queen?"

"I am ready."

A moment later Conrad Gordon was being conducted from the spot where his life had nearly been choked out of existence.

Not far from the tree the party halted beside four horses upon one of which Gold Conrad was helped by the arms of the two pards. He looked at Merta, but the Queen of Fate averted her face as if determined to tell him nothing beforehand.

The cavalcade galloped toward the mines. Scarlet hands held Gold Conrad's bridle-reins, and their owners never took their midnight eyes from his person.

Vulture Bar was left behind, and no rein was drawn until the road to Lodeton was reached.

Gold Conrad looked around. He saw the jagged rocks of the overhanging cliffs, and the stunted trees that grew on the brink of the canyon. As he took in this wild scenery, he saw the Rosebud draw a coil of rope from beneath his capacious jacket. The next minute he had drawn one end of it over the point of a rock forty feet above.

"My time has arrived!" said the voice of the Queen. "Ten years ago you had your day. We were happy among the mines of Armosillo, and my husband, your partner, worked for your interests as hard as he did for his own. But you wanted all. You had to get him out of your way and Colonel Thunder was to take his place. Then you formed the league of two—you and Colonel Thunder. I need not tell you how my husband met his fate in the mines. By your arm. I cried for vengeance; but you turned and struck me the meanest of all blows—you stole my child—my little Inez. Before this, however, your beautiful wife stood in your way to greed and gold; they found her dead one morning among the mountains, and her child—your son—Conrad Gordon, you afterward made your slave, and taunted him with the name of Indian. I have never lost sight of you; for ten years I have been near, striking all the time—the

flooded mines, the theft of your private diaries—it was my work.

"My league was against yours. I made Armosillo too hot to hold you; I followed you like the bloodhound follows the assassin. You held a secret. I wanted to know what you did with my child. I know now. You thought her dead; all those years you thought that Colonel Thunder had killed her, when, in truth, he was raising her to make her one of these days a gold queen or a silver princess. I found her without robbing you of any secret. Inez is mine once more."

"You said an hour ago that you had killed her," he retorted.

"So I did. I thought I had; but Heaven pitied the mother, even if it does frown on the avenger. I did not intend to strike until tomorrow night; but circumstances make me strike now. I sent three Indians to Lodeton tonight. My last command was: 'Spare nothing that is his!' You know what that means, Gold Conrad."

The listener bit his lip, and the Queen of Fate turned her head.

"Now!" she said to the Rosebud, "I am through. Do your duty."

The next instant something fell upon Gordon's shoulder and rested there. It was a rope.

All at once Merta's right hand waved a signal and Conrad was suddenly lifted from the saddle. The red giants pulled steadily on the rope and his body shot into the air.

Queen Merta's triumphant eyes gazed at the sight for a moment, and then turned toward Arkansaw.

"Bring them here," she said. "Take these with you and use them before you reach this place," and she placed two silken handkerchiefs in the bowie-king's hand.

The avenging party almost evenly divided.

Arkansaw and the Rosebud rode toward the Bar, while the Queen of Fate and the two Indians went on toward Lodeton.

Her revenge was almost complete; the skies that bent above Lodeton eighty miles away were to witness the *finale*.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE LAST THROW OF THE BOWIE.

"No one yet?"

"I hear nothing."

The first speaker, a beautiful young girl, sighed as she looked at the handsome young man, who had walked into the firelight that illumined the cave which she occupied.

"Oh, Halleck, all these wild events seem a dream to me," she exclaimed, a moment later. "That beautiful avenger my mother? Tell me again that I am awake—that I am Colonel Thunder's *protegee* no longer. When the voice at my door said: 'I am your mother!' I gasped for breath—I could not cry, and I felt like one dead at the bottom of my door. And when I awoke here and heard that voice again, and felt the burning kisses that she gave, I could not believe that I was in this world. No; it must be paradise. My mother! the woman who calls herself the Queen of Fate my—"

Halleck held up his hand and commanded silence; then he left the girl and went to the entrance of the mine and listened.

After a few minutes he returned. His face had a new expression; he had heard sounds.

"Everything is quiet now," he said, answering her anxious look. "They will soon be here."

At that very moment Silent Sam was bending over the fuse which, if it had not been tampered with, would blow them to atoms with the rocks of the mine.

But Arkansaw had been there, although Halleck and Esmer knew it not, and the hammer of Sam had exploded a cap—nothing more.

An hour of anxious waiting passed over the heads of the anxious pair in the mine.

Then both uttered a cry of joy for Arkansaw and the Rosebud stood before him.

"Hyar's the young pigeons!" exclaimed the latter, and the couple followed the pards into the moonlight.

There they found two horses beside the ones which the friends had ridden to the mine and were soon on their backs.

"Hyar, take these," whispered Arkansaw, slipping the handkerchief into the Rosebud's hands. "The young 'uns ar' not to see the man in the canyon. I'm goin' back to see 'em plant the cunnel ef they do it to-night."

The pards separated, and the Rosebud of the Pink Forks conducted Halleck and Esmer away.

"Halt! they're coming."

At these words seven horses came to a halt among lofty mountains, and their riders listened to the noise of hoofs that momentarily grew more distinct.

All at once three Indians burst into view, and in a few moments drew rein before the waiting group.

"All done!" said one of the braves. "The big white chief must build new lodges."

The eyes of Queen Merta sparkled.

She knew that her revenge was complete, that the torches of the Indians had reduced to ashes the property he had accumulated at Lodeton.

Here we drop the pen, gentle reader; but, if you wish, you may follow us to one of the proud cities of the young West and see the Queen of Fate give a blushing bride away. And if you stand in a certain place, you will hear the remark that two burly fellows are sure to pass about the young couple at the altar.

Vengeance and justice have triumphed, and love has won.

"Come, Rosebud, let's go and drink to the two pinks the parson tied together," remarked Arkansaw after the ceremony. "An' ef we kin git an audience, I'll show up in a bit o' knife handlin' thet 'll open the'r eyes. But gosh! Rosebud, I'll never be able to skeer up in this town the appreciative crowds I use to hev at the Bar! never!" and the bowie-king heaved a regretful sigh.

The two pards went away together, the observed of all observers as they passed down the street.

THE END.

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